



Remarks of Commissioner Jonathan T. Swain
Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago

November 7, 2019

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen of the Chicago City Council. Thank you for having us here today to present the 2020 spending plan for the Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago. With me today are key staff members: our Executive Director, Lance Gough; Assistant Executive Director Charles Holiday, Jr.; General Counsel Adam W. Lasker; Purchasing Agent Opal Walls; Communications Director James P. Allen; Finance Director Peter Peso; and two of our key executive assistants, Kathy Ross and Yvonne Jones. Normally, our Chairwoman, Marisel A. Hernandez, would be presenting; however, she is out of town on business.

Looking ahead to the 2020 election cycle, I am pleased to report three key items:

- (1) The electoral franchise in Chicago is sound and continuing to lead the State of Illinois in the areas of accuracy, security and, above all, participation;
- (2) In 2020, we will introduce new voting equipment that will provide more security, accuracy and transparency, and
- (3) We will be increasing the training and compensation for our poll workers.

At the same time, on a bittersweet note, I also need to report that our Executive Director, Lance Gough, plans to retire after the 2020 Primary. As many of you know, Lance is easily one of the most recognized and respected names in election administration in the United States. Lance has led national organizations of election administrators. Lance has provided expert testimony before Congress. Lance has even served as an international election observer in locations like war-torn areas of Europe and post-apartheid South Africa.

Lance first served the Election Board in the 1970s in the data processing department when Chicago voters were still using lever machines. After working on the West Coast, Lance returned to serve as the Executive Director in the 1980s.

Lance then managed the punch-card voting system and in 2006, Lance successfully managed the transition under the Help America Vote Act to paper ballots and touch screens.

Through that first decade with the Chicago Board, and then over these last 32 years, Lance successfully has managed elections involving thousands of candidates.

More importantly, Lance has been a force for securing and managing election reforms like:

- Motor-voter registration,
- Early voting,
- No-excuse Vote By Mail,
- Online voter registration,
- Election Day registration,
- Youth-engagement programs such as the unrivaled partnership that the Chicago Election Board has with Mikva Challenge,
- Automatic Voter Registration,
- Comprehensive accessibility programs, and,
- Language-assistance programs that are national models.

Currently, Lance is leading the Chicago Election Board staff through the transition to a new generation of ballot-scanning voting equipment. This new system not only tallies the marks on the paper ballots but also is designed to capture a scanned image of every ballot to allow for more security, transparency and accuracy in verifying every voter's intent.

This transition to new voting equipment is a massive undertaking. This project impacts every department in our election operation. We are fortunate to have an executive who is well versed in change management so that we can make this go as smoothly as possible.

That being said, we hope you will join us in saluting Lance Gough's decades of dedication and service to the electoral franchise.

To prepare for Lance's retirement, the Board secured the services, in August, of an executive search firm. That firm will assist the Commissioners in their efforts to find the strongest and most capable candidate to lead the Board staff in years to come.

2020 Budget Presentation to the Chicago City Council – Board of Elections
November 7, 2019

In assessing our 2020 budget, it is important to review events from our most recent elections. We just completed our busiest period of the four-year election cycle – with the November 2018 Midterm Election followed immediately by the filings for the February 2019 Municipal Election and then the April Run-Offs just six weeks after that first round.

At the November 2018 Midterm Election, we saw significant increases in participation. Chicago had the highest turnout for a Midterm in more than 30 years. Roughly 200,000 more voters participated in this most recent Midterm compared to the average for the prior 36 years. Much of that increase owed to stronger participation among voters in the 25-to-44 age bracket. The biggest growth area *in terms of voting method* came through our Vote By Mail program, where we set a new record with more than 116,000 applications. Most notably, more than 87% of those applicants returned their ballots by mail, and of the remaining 13%, half of those voted in person. So better than 93% of those voters followed through and cast a ballot.

The Board believes that those 2018 Midterm numbers bode well for strong turnouts again in Chicago – and across the United States – at the November 2020 Presidential Election.

In the more recent February and April municipal elections, we saw a record number of candidates file and make it to the ballot in the mayoral election. The 14-candidate field was the largest in the city's history.

Like the Midterm Elections, the City Elections in 2019 saw more voters opting to cast ballots through the Early Voting and Vote By Mail programs. Although Chicago has had higher turnouts in past Municipal Elections, this year's turnouts still were higher than our big-city counterparts in New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami – and the numbers were near the top among Midwest cities, topped only by the turnout rates in Minneapolis and Milwaukee.

Since April, the Board has focused on a variety of off-season projects:

- We're upgrading computer systems and security protocols.
- We're making computer-system adaptations to ensure the smooth utilization of the emerging statewide Automatic Voter Registration system.
- We completed the RFP process for the new voting equipment, selected a vendor and are now preparing to install the new balloting system.

- We're working to safeguard our elections through a variety of cybersecurity efforts, with the most visible change being the transition of our web site from chicagoelections.com to chicagoelections.gov similar to the change the City of Chicago made.
- We delivered a voter canvass notice that encouraged our voters to join our email list so that we may send them important notices, including invitations to Vote By Mail ahead of the March and November 2020 elections. With this, we hope to reduce costs while helping more voters participate from the comfort of their homes – and have another avenue to reach voters in the event of an emergency.
- We're preparing to upgrade training and compensation for our Judges of Election and other poll workers in an effort to keep pace with the city's minimum wage. Returning election judges who complete training and serve will be paid \$255, an important step up from the \$170 they were paid as recently as early 2018.

Looking ahead, our budget for 2020 represents an ambitious effort to contain costs even as we administer elections that, historically, have attracted the highest turnouts. New expenditure areas since 2016 include:

- Installing new voting equipment that will impact our warehouse operations, election supply carriers, trucking contracts, courier operations, poll-worker training, voter-education systems and public-information campaigns;
- Ongoing work with the U.S. Department of Justice, disability-rights partners and a variety of local agencies to meet newer standards for polling place accessibility;
- Additional translations to enhance language-accessibility of our voting systems, which will impact: preparation of the voting equipment; all printed materials for voters; website content; and, community outreach. We have been offering ballots in English, Spanish, Chinese and Hindi. Soon we will be adding Korean and Tagalog ballots, and later, additional languages including Polish.

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The City's 2020 budget of \$18.39 million for the Election Board will be far less than the City's 2019 budget of \$34.19 million. This reflects that during the 2020 Presidential Election cycle, Cook County is responsible for more of the Election Board's operations. In comparing the City's 2020 and 2016 budgets for the Election Board, the new budget reflects a reduction of 3 FTE positions and an average annual increase of 6%.

Factors contributing to our costs include:

- Offering Election Day (Same-Day) Registration which, requires more technology and training in every precinct. Poll books have been upgraded, as have training hours so that there are persons in every polling place who are trained and tested in being able to provide Voter Registration services.
- The schedule for Early Voting has grown significantly from 15 days to 40 days, and now continues through the Monday before Election Day.
- We anticipate continued increases in use of Vote By Mail. We anticipate surpassing the record we set in 2018 with 150,000 or more ballots cast through Vote By Mail ahead of the November election.
- The Board will receive some cyber-security funding under an extension of the Help America Vote Act, but not the type of funding that we saw in 2002 that largely covered the city's last purchase of new voting equipment in 2005.
- Postage rates that have increased since 2016.

In preparing this budget, the Board has paid extremely close attention to the City's need to conserve its financial resources.

We look forward to answering your questions.