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Election 2008



Easthampton clerk making a list, checking it twice for Election Day

By CATHERINE BAUM
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EASTHAMPTON - Today, the day before the presidential election, City Clerk Barbara LaBombard expects the phone to ring off the hook, last-minute absentee ballots to come in before the noon deadline, and election supply boxes to arrive at White Brook Middle School and Easthampton High School, where residents will cast their votes Tuesday.

But she's prepared to get it all done in a day's work.

"I tend to forget things, so I made a checklist," said LaBombard, who has worked for the city since 1983.

Included on her checklist are letters to the Department of Public Works, School Department and Police Department, outlining their roles Tuesday, namely the printing, marking and labeling of voter lists, and the packing of ballots into blue boxes.

The city has 11,614 registered voters. Voter turnout is expected to be 85 percent Tuesday, which is about 10 percent higher than the last presidential election in 2004, said LaBombard.

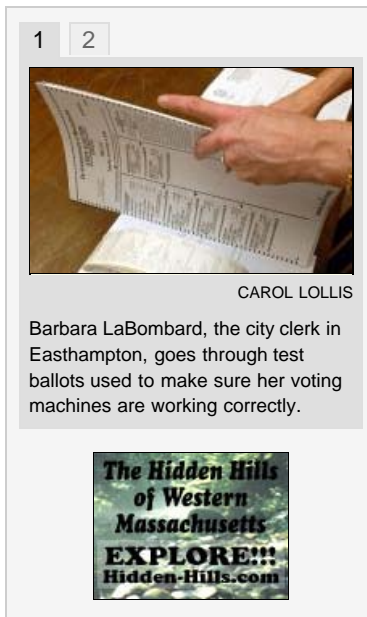
The most time-consuming aspect of this year's election is accommodating the high number of absentee voters, LaBombard said, as there are several steps involved in addressing, mailing and accounting for their ballots. The number of absentee ballots has increased each day in the run up to the election, with 461 on Tuesday and 530 on Thursday. There were 431 absentee voters in the 2004 presidential election.

But overall, she said, "You prepare the same way if you have 200 or 10,000 people."

In fact, LaBombard said she prefers a big election like this to a primary.

"It's just so much easier to have only one ballot and no worry about what party you're in," LaBombard said.

Historically, the most common task the day before Election Day is answering residents' questions about whether they're registered and where they should vote, she said.



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"From now until Election Day, that's what we'll get," she said last week.

On Tuesday, she opened the supply boxes, which were closed up after the state primary in September, to make sure all the signs identifying the five precincts were accounted for, as well as tape, pins and other polling supplies. She created a spreadsheet to tally the votes on election night, and the optical scan voting machines were tested for accuracy as well. LaBombard compared 50 votes counted by the machine to her hand counts and sent the results to the state Elections Division in Boston last week.

The machines, which operate via memory cards programmed to read the ballots, will be charged tonight in case the power goes out Tuesday. The ballots and optical scanners are locked in the City Building until they are taken to the polls on Election Day at 5:45 a.m., LaBombard said. Replacing paper ballots, the optical scanners were first used here in 1996.

LaBombard describes the machines as a "Godsend," because they tally up unofficial results as early as 15 minutes after the polls close.

In the days of tallying votes by hand, LaBombard recalls counting paper ballots in stacks of 50 until 3 or 4 a.m.

"As time goes by your eyes get tired and it's like, #Did I count that already?" she said.

Another change LaBombard has seen in her tenure here is organizing voter information in the statewide computer system and search engine instead of paper files.

Meanwhile, LaBombard began her Election Day planning this summer by reserving the school gymnasiums and cafeteria for the polls and organizing the crews that will staff them.

"It's such an important day everywhere," LaBombard said of Election Day as she organized polling supply boxes in the City Building last week. "It can be very exciting. ... There's such a build up. You're so focused on everything for quite a long time and then the day after it's like it never happened."

On Tuesday, the workers are set to arrive at the polls at 6:15 a.m. and the voters at 7 a.m.

In the end, "I just hope it's a nice day," LaBombard said.

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