

ELECTION NEWSLETTER

Recap of the 2020 Elections

Elections in 2020 presented challenges that none of us could have predicted. Fortunately, planning had been done to continue the administration of elections in Wilson County regardless of the situation we found ourselves in. Over the years, plans have been prepared, documented and revised with each election experience. The poll officer's debriefing after each election has provided invaluable insight into what improvements can be made and what procedures should be reevaluated. Thankfully, before the elections of 2020 arrived procedures had been created, poll officials had been trained and the behind-the-scenes systems had been tested.

As Ben Franklin (and Tammy Smith) said "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

Elections in 2020 began with the Presidential Preference Primary on March 3rd. In the early morning of March 3rd a tornado ripped through the county. When the polls opened that morning, two vote centers were unusable and 10 had no power. (at the end of the day four vote centers still only had generator power) Poll officials were prepared, polls were opened and voters were served despite the devastation around the county. Approximately 350 dedicated poll officials staffed vote centers that day and performed their part for democracy. The dedication and competency of Wilson County poll officials was evident and, in the wake of disaster, the election was a success.

With all our preparation and planning for various imagined "disasters", who would ever imagined countywide disaster occurring on Election Day? We always thought that a power outage would be localized and the power restored in a relatively short time or that all the other scenarios planned for would be of short duration and confined to one vote center or section of the county. Election Day on March 3, 2020 was the exception to all plans. There was no warning, no time to make alternate plans for polling locations as the tornado struck shortly after midnight on March 3rd. The vote centers were set up and ready for Election Day. The isolated polls were those with no damage- the majority were affected. We set up 18 vote centers throughout the county on Monday evening. On Tuesday morning one location had received a direct hit for the tornado, one was unusable because of debris and dangerous travel conditions, 10 were without power and the Election Commission office- the "hub" of the system was without power, phone and internet service.

We had prepared for many different scenarios and, on March 3rd, had the opportunity to test them all! The Election Commission office had internet connections to its servers restored by 4:30am. With the support of WEMA, TEMA and the Secretary of State's office several generators were quickly supplied to polling locations. As the sun came up the extent of the storm was realized.

Poll workers were on-site and on time election morning. Working with the supplies on hand, polls were opened, voters served and at the end of the day almost as many Wilson Countians voted on March 3rd as

had voted in the previous two weeks of Early Voting. You and your teams used your training and Tennessee ingenuity to utilize the resources provided to make voting accessible and available to all voters. Several vote centers operated with generators all day while some had power restored in the afternoon. The Election Commission office had no power until 30 minutes after the polls closed. We did our best to plan and provide for these catastrophes but you made the day a success!

The remaining two elections in 2020 were held under the shadow of a nationwide pandemic. In both August and November elections, you were challenged with preserving the integrity of every vote while protecting the safety of every voter and election worker. Changes were made to procedures during Early Voting and on Election Day to ensure the integrity of the votes and to protect the health and safety of voters and poll officials. Thanks to grants and cooperation with state and federal agencies, we had an adequate supply of PPE for both elections. The community pitched in by donating ink pens by the thousands. You came to training in smaller groups and maintained safe polling places during Early Voting and on Election Day. Voters were courteous and turned out in record numbers despite the caution.

Wilson County voters also experienced for the first time a more convenient form of voting in 2020. The introduction of vote centers allowed voters to choose the most convenient polling location to cast their vote on Election Day. Wilson County voters have long been advocates for Early Voting. With five Early Voting sites to choose from, 83% of those voting in the November 2020 Presidential Election took advantage of casting their vote before Election Day. Vote centers expanded the convenience of early voting choices to Election Day giving Wilson County voters 18 choices. Vote Centers were a great asset on March 3rd when other vote centers were unusable because of the tornado. They proved their value in each election after that, also. Voters were able to vote at the most convenient location, change their address and not be sent somewhere else to vote. We saw an increased number of voters as well as an increase in address changes as a result.

2020 was definitely a challenging year. We can look back on it now and marvel at the dedication and magnificent way each of you served Wilson County voters.

