

Tom Green County... *We Have a Problem!*



By Kat Rowoldt

What is more important, our voting system integrity or getting results out faster? That is the question. Can we accomplish both?

Judge Steve Floyd called a special workshop meeting of the TGC Election Committee to discuss this issue. Members of this committee are Judge Steve Floyd, Liz McGill, Becky Robles, and both Party Chairs. Absent from the meeting was Democrat Chair David Curry.

Link to the recording of the meeting: <https://youtu.be/aAnDg-H85AQ>

It seems that both Judge Floyd and Republican Chair Jeff Betty received calls from people who were not happy the results from Tom Green County were so slow in being reported. Why did this happen? Why can't TGC get reports out as quickly as Ector County (Odessa) which were through reporting by 9:30 p.m.?

I can honestly say, I would never have had a real understanding of all the working parts of an election if I had not been personally involved in working an election poll since 2014 and being a poll judge for the last several years. Nor would I have the understanding of election integrity if I had not been called in to investigate and report on two horrific election cases; one being in Bell County in 2016, and one in another county which my work is still sealed to be used in court of law in a pending state case from 2018.

The person responsible for explaining the events of the evening was Vona Hudson, who has been our Election Administrator since 2006. Having sat through countless hours of training under her since I began working the polls, I can attest to her heartfelt desire and meticulous work to assure that our county has the very best in election integrity and a non-discriminating voter environment. After what I have seen and reported on from around our state, this is truly a breath of fresh air.

During the course of the workshop, not one person questioned Ms. Hudson's integrity or the quality of the work her office does. The question really focused on the speed in which the results get out. I was able to count as many as eight election poll judges who were in attendance at the workshop as well.

This election was only the third time we have had this new equipment to use. Citizens are still learning how to use it, but the feedback has been very positive

in its ease. Those who have special challenges being able to read screens or need to hear the ballot read to them have all expressed thankfulness for the new equipment. It has helped them in so many ways.

There is another side to the equipment. It has to be programmed and prepared for each election. I can only imagine the work that goes into it long before I ever receive it at my poll.

There are three new key pieces of equipment. The new check-in process allows the voter to personally answer many questions simply on an iPad type device, while the poll worker uses a laptop to verify they are a registered voter and their information is correct while validating their photo ID looks like the person who presented it.

Next is the device which scans the label the laptop kicked out to provide the voter with the access code they need in order to vote. This process is simplified as well. The poll worker simply needs to make sure what the label says is what is keyed up to give the voter the correct ballot.

Finally, there is the new e-slate. The new voter machine provides a touch screen which can adjust the type size, contrast, and even attach headphones if needed. Once voters understand how to enter their access code, they are good to go even it's their first time using this type of machine.

Judge Floyd began the discussion explaining he had personally gone over to the election office to see how things were going with over a million dollars of election equipment needing to be brought in with the pending rain. His observation was one of how tired the election workers looked after having worked a fourteen to fifteen-hour day before dragging into the election office with their poll data and equipment. He additionally commented that a few of the poll workers had failed to return with some key equipment and had to return to their poll to get it. He suggested that the county may need to look at having some additional workers to help wrap things up at the end of the day to assist the poll workers in getting back to the election office earlier.

Ms. Hudson began her report to the Committee by reporting one of the first issues of the day was the number of laptops that locked up or went down right as the voting began. My poll is one that lost our primary laptop immediately. Fortunately, we had two others which were working and carried the load until we got the first one replaced with another unit. A few of the polls had to improvise to keep the voting process moving, Hudson reported, adding the poll workers' stress level began early in the day.

Ms. Hudson called Ector (Odessa), Midland, and Hood (Granbury) counties to compare their process with ours. She also prepared a report on each vote center and the times involved at each location. Plus, she had her staff improvise a poll center closing down to see the time involved in doing it. Their time was one

hour and fifteen minutes, without adding drive time to it. NOTE: The Election office staff is very familiar with the equipment as opposed to the volunteers who handle it infrequently.

Tom Green County has a total of nineteen vote centers. Many, if not all, of the vote centers had people in line at 7:00 p.m. which delayed them in being able to close down and begin the accounting process before returning to the election office. Only seven polls arrived at the election office before 9:00 p.m. The remaining twelve arrived between 9:00 and 11:30 p.m. that evening.

Chair Betty began questioning Hudson on the results posted on the document she had handed the committee. Hudson cited one of the election laws which required a procedure to be done a certain way and Betty replied "we are going to have to argue" referring to the interpretation of the code. Then he asked if the other counties were not following the law since it took them less time to get out the results.

Betty continued his argument with an analogy and stated, "it's just too damn late, ...I've got to dynamite you lose. I've got to make you stop being so dang careful." Please listen to the whole thing in context [24:07-25:18]. Betty goes on to ask Hudson if there was a 10-vote discrepancy if it would have affected the results in Tom Green County. [25:40-26:00] She replied not in this election. (*I, Kat Rowoldt, do remember one recently where a bond election was lost by just two votes.*)

Betty Lacy, an election poll judge, stood to address the committee. [30:52-40:09] Lacy calmly explained from a judge's viewpoint the importance of getting things to balance before heading back to the election office. In the course of what she was saying, she stated that people do not have a clue what goes on in the election office months before to put on an election. After several minutes, Chair Betty interrupted her and asked if she was saying that he, Jeff Betty, did not know enough about the elections? She never stated anything along this line. She clarified to Chair Betty that she was speaking about the public and not Jeff Betty. He did not take it that way and laid out a threat to Judge Floyd, rephrasing it as a promise and not a threat, to pull the election out of the hands of the County Elections office. [38:30-39:48] He rudely cut Ms. Lacy off and turned his head away from her after threatening the judge and then accusing Ms. Lacy of threatening him. Tempers flared!

Question: How would Chair Betty hold an election? He does not have any voter equipment or employees. Where would he find the funding to get that equipment? Judge Floyd had already stated that the equipment the taxpayers had purchased for the County costs over a million dollars?

Judge Floyd pulled the meeting back into a calm mode and refreshed the topic of the meeting: timeliness of getting results out. Ms. Hudson returned to the podium and walked back through the things that had been discussed and

mentioned, that a programming error on their part resulted in their not being able to have the early voting results ready by seven o'clock. Usually they run it around five or six and have it ready to get out right after the 7:00 poll closing. She further stated that she would not circumvent the law in order to get results out earlier, but she will work to get the results quicker. She is open to having additional people to help get the V drives in earlier so the results can be run.

One of the comments that Chair Betty made to Judge Floyd during his threat/promise, was the fact that he knew the county counted on the dollars from the elections for their budget. Ms. Hudson clarified that statement when she returned to the podium. She stated they only billed out what the actual costs were, basically clarifying that there is no profit for the county to hold these elections.

Judge Floyd input his thought of having someone who is monitoring where the polls are in their closing process and getting in would be helpful to speed things up, calling those who are running late to pull their things and come on in to finish their tallies at the election office. He once again stated no one questions the integrity of the election and he does not want to sacrifice the integrity. Early voting results being released as soon as possible would help. He asked Vona to return in two to three weeks with potential changes to address this issue.

Chair Betty ends his discussion by stating 'the next meeting won't be a workshop because if we don't see fundamental changes then my next request will be for the resignation of the current Election Administrator and the appointment of a new one.'

Judge Floyd asked that they return with a plan in 2-3 weeks. The meeting adjourned.

I end this report with my opening question. What is more important, our voting system integrity or getting results out faster? That is the question. Can we accomplish both? This is still to be seen.

Until next time...

Kat Rowoldt

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