



**Proposal to Expand Voter Service Hours:
An Analysis & Recommendations**

**MINNEAPOLIS CITY COUNCIL
Standing Committee on Elections & Rules**

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Proposal for Expanded Voter Service Hours

Summary

The City of Minneapolis has been contacted by various nonprofit, community-based organizations advocating for increased ballot access, specifically in the form of expanded in-person service hours in conjunction with Minnesota's new "no excuse" absentee voting law. In response, policymakers have inquired as to the impact of expanding voter service hours within the following parameters:

- Increase service hours each weekday during the two-week period leading to the General Election from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., which corresponds with plans identified by Hennepin County for service hours;
- Retain existing service hours on the two Saturdays immediately prior to the General Election, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.;
- Add service hours on the two Sundays immediately prior to the General Election, from 12 noon to 4 p.m.

Change in Schedule

Pursuant to Minn. Stat. § 203B.085, jurisdictions must be open to serve in-person absentee voters from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on the Saturday immediately preceding Election Day. This is the only statutory mandate affecting service hours for absentee voting. In Minneapolis, the Elections & Voter Services Division provides service hours for in-person absentee voters on the two Saturdays before Election Day, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. both days. This equates to nine hours more than the statutory minimum to serve voters. In addition, the Elections & Voter Services Division provides service hours for voters during regular business hours, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. On the Monday prior to Election Day, the City provides services hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (in accordance to Minn. Stat. § 203B.085). Minneapolis does not currently provide any services hours on Sundays. According to the existing schedule, the City of Minneapolis provides a total of approximately 278 service hours to voters during the 46-day absentee voting period.

The proposed extension of service hours would add two and one-half hours each day during the regular work week, Monday through Friday, for a total of 25 additional service hours. Sunday service hours, as proposed, would add another 8 hours of service for voters and the Monday before election for an additional hour. There is no change to the existing number of hours on the two Saturdays considered as part of the proposal. Thus, if approved, the proposal would increase the overall number of services hours for voters from approximately 278 hours to roughly 312 hours during the 46-day absentee voting period, an increase of roughly 10 percent.

Staffing Impact

Pursuant to Minn. Stat. § 204B.05, the City is designated to administer absentee voting for federal, state, and local elections. There are essentially three methods for conducting absentee voting: by mail, in-person, and servicing health care facilities. The proposed extension of in service hours primarily targets in-person absentee voting, which is the focus of this analysis; however, expanding service hours associated with one method does have ancillary impacts on the overall administration of absentee voting functions due to the overlap of functions and the limited workforce.

In Minneapolis, the minimum number of judges required to staff a polling place is six, which includes four team judges (statutory) as well as the head and assistant head judges who are responsible for overall management of the polling place. This minimum staffing level is subject to further refinement based on a number of criteria, including:

- The type of election being planned – federal, state, or local, and regular or special;
- The number of current registered voters (a fluid number that changes daily with new registrations);

- Ballot content—including the number of competitive races and questions that may impact turnout;
- Analysis of voter turnout trends and projections, including Election Day Registrations, for specific precincts and community zones as well as the entire city;
- Nuances reflecting a specific precinct’s character, such as accessibility assistance, interpretation, and other forms of “voter support services”; and
- Strategies to address scheduling needs to accommodate potential shortages, breaks, or last-minute challenges impacting the expected number of election judges to be deployed.

Although these factors primarily impact planned staffing for precincts on Election Day, they also must be factored into the equation to adequately staff an active polling place to serve in-person absentee voting.

Thus, the actual number of judges needed to staff a polling place fluctuates depending on demand.

Maintaining a polling place at City Hall to serve in-person absentee voters must accommodate this flexible approach when there may be dates and times for additional staffing to serve the influx of voters from day to day.

Beginning with the 2012 Presidential Election, the Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services Division enhanced its in-person absentee voter service by establishing a “polling place” at City Hall, located in the Rotunda. This polling place is staffed every working day during the 46-day absentee voting period by the core team of permanent and seasonal staffers and election judges, generally following the outline described above. This is far above and beyond what is required by state law; in fact, most jurisdictions offer voter service during business hours in the election official’s office and do not take the additional steps of creating a specific polling place to serve in-person absentee voters. Unfortunately, the office space allocated to the Elections & Voter Services Division (City Hall, Room 201) is insufficient to serve a large volume of voters, and it is impossible to predict voter turnout from day to day—or even hour to hour—during the 46-day period for absentee voting. As a consequence, working with partners at the Municipal Building Commission and the City’s Property Services and Information Technology departments, the Elections Division created a polling place in the Rotunda. This space is large enough to serve the fluctuating daily volume of voters who choose to take advantage of in-person absentee voting. Essentially, City Hall becomes a “super polling place” because it serves voters from all 125 precincts through a central site—similar to the concept of a voting center. Staffing is increased from the minimum level to accommodate the multiple numbers of precincts administered in that single location. During the recent 2014 Primary, staffing for the City Hall polling place averaged 6-8 election judges per day and increased to 25-30 high voter turnout and on Saturdays.

Based on a preliminary analysis, staff believes the best approach to cover the proposed expansion in service hours during the week is to transition to a system of two shifts. The first shift (A) would be assigned to set-up for opening the polling place beginning at 6:30 a.m. and then staff the City Hall polling place from 7 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. The second shift (B) would begin at 10 a.m. though close each day at 6:30 p.m., providing sufficient coverage during peak lunch-time hours and then continuing through the remainder of the day, including a 30-minute period after service hours end at 6 p.m. to close the polling place and secure ballots, supplies, and equipment. The additional hours available to voters daily necessitates this addition of a full team of judges for an eight hour shift. Overlapping shifts provides sufficient coverage for peak service hours to direct voter flows, assist voters with second language needs, and complete administrative functions related to processing absentee ballots, as well as to cover lunches and breaks throughout the day. That number could be increased by the Director of Elections & Voter Services based on need, particularly during the added evening hours for which we lack prior experience to anticipate potential turnout volumes. Minneapolis already provides expanded voter service hours, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., on the two Saturdays immediately prior to Election Day. The proposed policy for expanded service hours does not impact these service hours in any way.

In addition to serving in-person absentee voters, the administrative functions for absentee ballots submitted in-person and by mail must be completed on a daily basis. These activities include processing forms and

related paperwork, updating absentee voter records, verifying the accuracy and completeness (accept or reject) of absentee ballots, and preparing for the final stage of the Absentee Ballot Board which convenes seven days prior to the election under state law. The Absentee Ballot Board consists of several teams of election judges that follow step-by-step instructions to process and document absentee ballots and deliver those to Hennepin County for official tabulation. If staffers and election judges are not needed in the polling place to serve in-person voters, they would be reassigned to the office to assist with these other absentee voting functions that are also subject to strict, unwavering timelines set by state statute.

Staffing for the additional hours on Sundays can be accommodated in a single shift each day, although staff recommends a higher staff level in the polling place on that day, especially on Nov. 2. It also needs to be noted the addition of in-person voting hours on the final Sunday prior to Election Day will require additional time allocated on that day to process the ballots cast right away, given the extremely short window remaining for that to be completed.

During the two-week period prior to Election Day, the Elections & Voter Services Division is busy finalizing plans to staff and supply the City's 125 precincts. This is no small undertaking, and requires extraordinary attention to countless details and careful coordination with a myriad of internal and external partners. Adding Sunday service hours in this same period means the core team of permanent and seasonal staffers and election judges would have no break in the critical build-up to Election Day; that is, no time for rest and recovery before Election Day, which increases the levels of stress and exhaustion that the team experiences. Moreover, this same team is instrumental in assuring the success of Election Day, which imposes a minimum 18-hour workday, beginning at 5:30 a.m. and continuing through until results are reported and ballots have been returned, usually around 11 p.m. Work continues on the following days to finalize documents and prepare election materials to return to the county for canvassing and certification of official results. Naturally, staff is concerned about fatigue and burnout and the potential negative impacts that could result from stretching this small team too far.

While the Elections & Voter Services Division appreciates (and supports) the general policy objective of expanding access to the ballot, staff is equally concerned about the potential negative consequences this proposal may have. In order to avoid errors caused by stress, fatigue, and burnout, it is essential the City actively recruit, train, and deploy a sufficient number of seasonal staff and election judges to handle the increased impact anticipated by expanding service hours for in-person absentee voters. The Elections Division already dedicates significant resources toward recruitment and training; in fact, of the five-person team, 2 FTEs are focused primarily on these functions, supplemented by the full-time support of seasonal staffers. These resources cannot be stretched further. The City could benefit from the active assistance of partner agencies in identifying and recruiting potential seasonal staffers and election judges—including those agencies and individuals who advocate for this expansion in service hours.

Estimated Fiscal Impact

Within the parameters of this proposal, staff worked to identify a maximum potential fiscal impact, recognizing that actual expenditures may vary due to a number of factors, not least of which is the total number of seasonal workers and election judges that will be required during the 46-day absentee voting period. This proposal is also likely to impact the amount of overtime, although precise details are unknown at this point and are variable depending on multiple factors, including voter turnout and the level of success in recruiting additional seasonal workers and election judges.

Staff estimates the total potential fiscal impact of for the specific expanded hours contained in this proposal is approximately \$10,500. This reflects additional weekday service hours during the two-week period prior to Election Day as well as the addition of new service hours on the two Sundays immediately prior to Election Day—reflected on the chart on the following page.

It should be noted no additional funding has been allocated to the Office of City Clerk/Elections & Voter Services Division to address these additional costs. Staff will work closely with the Finance & Property Services Department to track additional costs resulting from this proposal, if approved, and report back to the Elections & Rules Committee with further recommendations after completing all work associated with the 2014 General Election.

Estimated Fiscal Impact of Proposal to Expand Voter Service Hours

	# of Days Impacted	# of Staff	Added Hours	Total
Weekdays October 20-24 October 27-31	10	6	8	\$8,376
Sunday October 26	1	8	5	\$698
Sunday November 2	1	10	7	\$1,221.50
Monday November 3	1	12	1	\$209.40
				<u>\$10,504.90</u>

Again, staff is not requesting an additional appropriation at this time. Staff expects to handle the additional costs for expanded service hours within the existing budget. However, the Elections Division will track the actual budgetary impact, working with the Finance Department, in order to provide a final accounting as part of its regular report of the 2014 Gubernatorial Election. If an additional appropriation is needed, staff will bring that request forward at the appropriate time, after a full accounting has been completed. At this point, staff is proposing to “test” the proposal for expanded service hours in conjunction with this year’s general election to determine the potential applicability for similar service hours in future years as part of a larger policy objective of increasing voter access to the ballot box.

Staff Recommendation

If policymakers wish to implement expanded service hours for in-person absentee voters, consistent with the outline detailed in this report, staff would offer the following recommendations:

1. Authorize extended service hours for in-person absentee voters during the two-week period prior to the 2014 General Election scheduled for November 4 to include—
 - Service hours Monday through Friday, October 20-24, and October 27-31, running from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a 30-minute opening and a 30-minute closing period each day for set-up and take-down purposes;
 - Service hours on Monday, November 3, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., consistent with existing statutory requirements;
 - Service hours on Saturdays, October 26 and November 1, consistent with current practice as well as statutory requirements; and
 - Service hours on Sundays, October 26 and November 2, from 12 noon to 4 p.m.

See the following calendar for details:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
<i>October</i>	20 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	21 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	22 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	23 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	24 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	25 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.
26 12 – 4 p.m.	27 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	28 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	29 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	30 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	31 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.	<i>November</i> 1 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.
2 12 – 4 p.m.	3 7 a.m. – 5 p.m.	4 <i>Election Day</i>				

2. Authorize the Director of Elections & Voter Services to schedule additional staff hours to serve in-person absentee voters as needed.
3. Report back to the Elections & Rules Committee after the 2014 General Election with details about the actual impact of extended in-person absentee hours to determine if and how in-person absentee voting hours should be managed, including both policy and operational issues or recommendations, for application in future elections.