

ACT 77—CHANGES OF NOTE

Last fall the PA Legislature approved, and Governor Wolf signed into law, Act 77, which makes several notable changes to the Pennsylvania Election Code, which controls the way we run elections in the Commonwealth. Act 77's changes will become most visible to residents of Delaware County, and the rest of Pennsylvania, when they show up to vote in this year's primary election on April 28. But the changes require actions and extensive preparation in advance of that date. Those actions and preparations are well underway in Delaware County. The following addresses some of the more notable changes arising out of Act 77. Note that there are other changes under Act 77; the following discussion is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be.

NEW VOTING EQUIPMENT

One of the most visible changes coming out of Act 77 will be a change in the types of voting systems that may be used by counties in elections. Voting systems must now offer a paper backup system. The voting machines used in Delaware County for many years did not meet that requirement and had to be replaced. The outgoing County Council authorized the purchase of new voting equipment from a company called Hart. The same equipment purchased by Delaware County is already in use in Lancaster County and by all reports has performed very well.

Delaware County took delivery of the new Hart equipment beginning around the turn of the new year. The process of certification of the new equipment was recently completed under the supervision of the County Bureau of Elections and went smoothly.

The County Bureau of Elections has started the process of familiarizing the residents of Delaware County about the new voting equipment. That effort will continue through the Primary, and likely through the rest of the year leading up to the General Election in November. In the coming weeks, the Bureau will also begin training poll workers on the new equipment.

ELIMINATION OF “ONE TOUCH” STRAIGHT PARTY TICKET VOTING

Another noticeable change from Act 77 is the elimination of one touch straight party ticket voting. Of course, voters can still vote a straight party ticket. They will just need to vote for the candidates individually rather than by pushing a single button, as they used to be able to do.

NEW DEADLINE TO REGISTER

Act 77 brings an important change regarding the deadline to register to vote in Pennsylvania. The old registration deadline was 30 days before the election. The new deadline is 15 days before the election. The County Voter Registration Office is making plans to be able to handle the impact of the new deadline on its operations.

NEW MAIL-IN VOTING OPTION

Another highly publicized change to our election process coming from Act 77 is the introduction of “no excuse” mail-in voting. This will work much like absentee ballots have worked in the past. But unlike absentee ballots, which you could only get if you met certain specific conditions, Mail-in ballots can be used by any properly registered voter in Pennsylvania. Absentee ballots still exist, as well, for those who want to continue to use them.

The county bureau of elections will start to process mail-in and absentee ballot applications at least 50 days before the primary. Applications for mail-in and absentee ballots must be received by the Bureau at no later than 5:00 pm on the Tuesday before the election. Voters can return their mail-in and absentee ballots up until Election Day. Those ballots must be received by the Bureau of Elections by 8 pm on Election Day to count.

NEW PROCESS FOR CANVASSING ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Under Act 77, absentee ballots will no longer be sent out to polling places to be opened on Election Day after the close of the polls. They will be opened and canvassed centrally by this Board shortly after the election.

EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING

Act 77 has provisions that require counties to offer early in-person voting of mail-in and absentee ballots at the county Bureau of Elections. This will be available from 50 to 7 days before Election Day. The good news is that Delaware County has been doing this with absentee ballots for several years so compliance with this new requirement will involve only modest changes to the process that has been in place.

POSSIBLE SATELLITE LOCATION EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING

Act 77 also permits counties to establish one or more satellite locations, in addition to the Bureau of Elections, for early in-person voting of mail-in and absentee ballots.

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