

Indiana Secretary of State touts vote centers



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PLYMOUTH — How voters cast ballots on Election Day is slowly changing in Indiana.

Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson met with county clerks and election board members from the northern part of the state Monday, April 8, to fill them in on how a group of counties have made the transition to using vote centers. The centers allow residents to vote at any polling site in their county rather than being assigned a specific location.

Cass County Clerk Beth Liming explains how her county implemented vote centers in 2007 during a meeting of county clerks and election board officials with Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson on Monday, April 8, in Plymouth.

Elkhart County Clerk Wendy Hudson was among the group interested to hear what Lawson had to say about the seven counties that have implemented vote centers and two others that will give it a try in 2014.

The city of Goshen had planned to test the vote center concept this fall, but [it wasn't in the cards](#). Hudson said in February that the budget for a program at Ball State University that certifies new voting equipment had been slashed, but pending state legislation could restore the funding.

“The budget bill provides for permanent funding for the certification program, so provided that bill passes, then the certification program will start back up again,” Hudson said.

Lawson, a former Hendricks County clerk, has been touring the state to host regional meetings touting the benefits of vote centers. Monday's gathering at the Marshall County Building in Plymouth included representatives from Elkhart, St. Joseph, Marshall, Fulton and Cass counties.

Lawson is a proponent of vote centers but said it is up to each county whether it wants to go that route for elections. Three counties — Wayne, Tippecanoe and Cass — piloted vote centers in 2007.

Two people from Elkhart County traveled to Tippecanoe County for the primary election in 2012 to observe vote centers in action. Impressed by the flexibility for voters and potential monetary savings for the county, Hudson hopes to be able use vote centers in Elkhart County in just a couple of years. Hudson doesn't have an exact cost on how much new voting equipment would be but expects the price tag to be around \$900,000.

“I'm going to put it in my budget that I will prepare for 2014, so the budget that I present this summer will include an equipment purchase,” Hudson said. “I hope it passes because we won't be able to move forward without new equipment.”

Though there is an initial investment required for electronic poll books and new computer equipment, there are potential reductions in election costs, Lawson noted. With vote centers, there are fewer locations, fewer poll workers and possibly fewer voting machines needed, she pointed out. Aside from savings, Lawson said

one of the biggest selling points for vote centers is convenience for voters.

“There is no wrong place for them to show up to vote,” Lawson said.

Counties that want to begin using vote centers have to complete a series of steps that start with gauging interest among elected county officials, voters, community leaders and political party representatives. County councils and commissioners must pass resolutions in support of the transition. Next, the county has to form a study committee to discuss the logistics of implementing vote centers, training poll workers, voting locations, costs and technology among other factors. Each county’s election board must unanimously approve the plan and file it with the Indiana Election Division.

“This is not a partisan issue,” Lawson said. “Both parties have to buy in on this in order for it to be successful. That’s why it requires that unanimous vote.”

Lawson has visited each of the seven counties that have started using vote centers. She toured a vote center in Vanderburgh County located at a mall for Election Day. None of the voters, she said, had to wait longer than 20 minutes to cast their ballots.

With vote centers, early voting is still an option. Cass County, for example, has six vote centers open prior to Election Day. The county opens an additional vote center on Election Day for more than 22,000 registered voters, according to Cass County Clerk Beth Liming. State law dictates that counties must have at least one vote center for every 10,000 active voters.

Liming has not seen much of a difference in turnout among absentee voters since 2007.

“You’re still going to have a few voters out there that don’t want anything to do with that technology, so you’re still going to have a few that still want that ballot mailed to them,” she said.

Data does not show that vote centers increase overall voter turnout, Lawson added.

“But it does help you in the county clerks office because you don’t have voters showing up at the wrong precinct and poll workers calling you and saying ‘Where should I send this voter’ because there is not wrong place for them to vote,” she said. “Every vote center is going to have an entire poll list for the entire county.”