

# The People's Choice

## Vote Centers Offer Options, County Savings

By Candace Gwaltney

**T**he question on Election Day is not just which candidates' names to check at the polls, but when is the best time to vote. Should you try to make it before work, or should you risk the rush back to your precinct to cast your ballot before 6 p.m.?

While choosing the right candidate remains the voter's prerogative, a program piloted in three Indiana counties could make the latter questions irrelevant. Vote centers allow voters to choose from multiple polling places throughout their county, while consolidating the system and saving counties' money, Indiana Secretary of State Todd Rokita says.

Wayne, Tippecanoe and Cass counties all have abandoned the precinct voting system to try out the vote center concept. Wayne and Tippecanoe enacted the new approach in 2007, while Cass County first used the vote centers in the May primary.

"It's been a great exercise in voting like we live in the 21st century," Rokita asserts. "Technology, automation and new processes have been a part of every other transaction we have in life. And the goal here was to bring some of that idea to our most sacred civic transaction – and that is casting a ballot."

First developed in Larimer County, Colorado, vote centers allow officials to determine the location and number of polling places in a county. Voters can choose which center is most convenient to cast their ballot, instead of being limited to their precinct. Polls in Indiana remain open the regular 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. hours.

### Cutting costs

"As much as it is an election efficiency exercise, it is also a government consolidation exercise," Rokita notes.

Counties save money because they need fewer voting machines, less storage space for the machines and fewer poll workers, he explains.

In a typical precinct election, Tippecanoe County would spend about \$70,000 on poll workers' salaries. Using the voter centers in this year's primary election, the county spent about \$20,000, county clerk Linda Phillips offers.

"You can tailor your staff for your expected turnout," Phillips notes. For the November general election, more poll workers will be in place for the busier election. Conversely, she expects only \$12,000 of labor costs for the non-presidential 2010 primary, unless there is a hotly contested race.

The total cost for the Tippecanoe County 2004 primary election was \$78,000. With an increased voter base of more than 20,000 people, the county estimated the 2008 primary election under the precinct model would have cost \$110,000. Instead, the vote center total came to \$75,000, Rokita states.

Wayne County spent \$9,000 more on the 2008 primary compared to 2004. Voter turnout doubled though, data indicated.

Counties that do use vote centers have start-up expenses such as computers for polling sites and an electronic poll book system. Tippecanoe and Wayne counties were able to salvage county computers that were being replaced to forgo that expense, says Joe McLain, Indiana administrator of the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

Cass County faced a unique predicament going into this year's primary. The company from which its voting machines were purchased as part of HAVA had gone out of business, forcing the county to buy new equipment. By using vote centers, the county could buy fewer machines for this year's election with a savings of \$475,000, Rokita notes.

Under the voter center model, McLain estimates the state would have saved about half of the HAVA money, or \$20 million, spent on equipment because counties would not have needed to buy as many machines.

Rokita asserts the vote center concept fits within the goals and parameters of the Kernan-Shepard commission recommendations on government efficiency. This year the General Assembly approved



Voters lined up to cast their ballots at the Richmond Senior Center vote center on May 6 (reprinted from Palladium-Item/Joshua Smith).



**In November 2005, a delegation from Indiana visited a vote center in Larimer County, Colorado, where the concept was developed and implemented.**

adding the third pilot program in Cass County, but failed to pass legislation to allow all counties to voluntarily implement vote centers. Rokita says it will be a matter of the Legislature “putting aside their partisan differences” for it to pass in 2009.

“Even if law passes, it’s not going to be forced down any county’s throat. It’s there if they want it, and they can decide,” he adds. “And I hope that they do (decide to implement it), because the larger the county, our data is showing, the bigger the savings.”

### Fewer sites, more options?

Under the vote center concept, counties can locate more polling sites in highly populated areas and fewer in rural areas, resulting in about 80% fewer sites.

Is this limiting access? “No, you are increasing access,” Rokita asserts. “(Under precincts) you have one place in this entire state you can go to legally cast a vote. Think about that. That’s very inaccessible.” A vote center county such as Tippecanoe offers 20 choices (compared to 95 precincts).

Instead, voters can cast ballots at the school where they drop off their kids, at a downtown site during their lunch break or at polls next to the grocery store, he says.

In Tippecanoe County, voters said they appreciated being able to vote wherever is easy for them, Phillips says. One vote center – a private Catholic school – saw a staggering number of people from all over the county.

Fewer centralized voting places allow county officials to eliminate the need for as many poll workers. This fall Phillips expects to use 240 poll workers, compared to 475 workers if Tippecanoe ran a precinct election.

**Poll workers at a Richmond vote center use computers to check voter registration cards during the May primary** (reprinted from *Palladium-Item/Joshua Smith*).



### Buy milk, then vote

With the money saved through vote centers, Phillips offered voters even more options by setting up “early polling sites.”

All counties have the opportunity to set up satellite voting offices (or Phillips’ “early polling sites”), though few counties do so, Rokita notes. This concept is separate from the vote center. (In an early example of flexibility and convenience, Marion County offered two satellite centers for early voting in 2002).

The Tippecanoe County satellite voting sites were set up at grocery stores and community centers and open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week, Phillips explains.

In the first election with the early sites, 26% of ballots were cast at an early site. Participation increased to 27.5% in the second election. Phillips expects that number to continue to gradually go up and top off near 50% – a trend that occurred in Colorado’s vote center county.

### The experience

People casting their ballot at a vote center will notice differences from the precinct experience.

To prevent voter fraud, the polling sites are connected to high-speed Internet. Voters are checked in via computer so the system immediately knows when they voted. People are still required to provide a signature in person (Tippecanoe County asked voters to bring a postcard they received in the mail to sign) and photo ID, but gone are the poll books.

“You’re seeing young people working the polls because they’re not intimidated by the software and computer,” Rokita says. In Indiana, the average age of a poll worker is 72. As fewer of the “greatest generation” are able to work the polls, vote centers encourage more young people to become involved, he notes.

### Public acceptance

The Ball State University Bowen Center for Public Affairs released a study in April examining the 2007 vote centers in Indiana. Surveys in Wayne and Tippecanoe counties showed 80% of respondents “indicated that vote centers were either equally or more convenient than their old precinct.”

Aspects of the vote center that were well-received by the voters included: “convenient locations; well-trained workers and efficient procedures; and early voting at vote centers.”

Researchers also used the study to find if vote centers would increase turnout. The results did not support that theory. “The data suggest that electoral competitiveness is a more likely determinant of voter turnout. However, it is also apparent that the use of vote centers, coupled with an early voting period and well-trained poll workers, is unlikely to discourage voters from turning out,” the study finds.

#### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Todd Rokita, Indiana Secretary of State, at [www.in.gov/sos](http://www.in.gov/sos)

Linda Phillips, Tippecanoe County, at [www.tippecanoe.in.gov](http://www.tippecanoe.in.gov)

Ball State University Bowen Center for Public Affairs at [www.bsu.edu/politicalscience/bowencenter](http://www.bsu.edu/politicalscience/bowencenter)