Presentation to Board of Supervisors – October 22, 2018

By Adrian Fontes, Maricopa County Recorder

Mr. Chair, Gentlemen:

As we approach the 2018 General Election, it is important that we look at the significant improvements that have been made in the administration of elections in Maricopa County.

Because there is great public interest in the entire working of the Department, I will be thorough in my presentation.

Written copies of these remarks will be made available to the press when I conclude.

This General Election, there will be 2,254,596 eligible Maricopa County voters.

Since taking office in January 2017, voter registration has increased by a **net** 62,000 votes for Maricopa County.

This 62,000 net increase comes at a high volume of work, however, for our voter registration staff. Hundreds of thousands more transactions must be researched, processed to update addresses, make voters that move out of the County inactive or cancelled, and add information to our database about voters. Since January of this year, our voter registration staff has processed 538,000 transactions on the Maricopa County voter file.

Despite this workload, for the first time in years, the voter registration department has completed the task of processing every new and modified voter registration request prior to the deadline of requesting an early ballot.

In the most recent year, from April 2018 through September 2018, our office processed 117,221 new registrants:

- 22,968 on paper forms
- 31,257 on ServiceArizona.com
- 62,996 at an MVD office

And all that work happened in a year when that same department had a significant increase in the amount of candidate challenges and petition checks for initiatives and referendum – 74 candidate challenges and 12 initiatives and recalls – requiring that hundreds of thousands of petition signatures be hand verified to determine if the signer was eligible to sign those petitions. Additionally, our staff helped prepare legal paperwork and testify in court for those cases. Our voter registration staff also hand checks the signatures for Clean Elections contribution forms.

We are currently employing 42 temporary voter registration staff into a division that has been working 12-hour days for at least six days a week since May.

As an aside, please don't be surprised if you see some budget requests to support increased voter registration staff and automation on our IT side to streamline this part of the operation and make things more efficient.

The long and short of voter registration is that we are still working the daily requests for changes of address and other work that comes into the division.

But this is a good time to segue into current ballot processing. This is where human resource management comes into play. As you know, the vast majority of our voters vote by mail. Eighty-five percent of voters cast early ballots in the Primary Election. Each one of those ballot envelopes meets a high level of scrutiny before we open them and send them for tabulation. So where the voter registration work is subsiding, the ballot processing work is already increasing.

We have mailed out 1,613,432 ballots to people on the Permanent Early Voting List and continue to get one-time requests for early ballots via our website and the STAR Call Center phone hotline. Friday's numbers have us over 250,000 ballots returned and we finished up signature verifying those over the weekend. This work represents only a small portion of the total we are dealing with daily, and we will continue this part of our work through and past Election Day.

Some of the increased work we will see falls into the area of ballot processing. Sometime in the last few cycles, as I am sure you are well aware, the Department shut off the safeties on the C-400 tabulators for over-votes. The impact of shutting off the safeties is that ballots with stray marks on them, which can be misread by the counting machines as over-votes for some races, are automatically rejected as over-votes. For example, if a voter uses a Sharpie, it often bleeds through the paper and shows up as a stray mark on the opposite side of the ballot. It is not an over-vote but the machine may misread it as such.

Once I was made aware of this situation, I resumed the more historical practice of using the machine safety mechanisms to out-stack those ballots containing extra marks during counting and have bipartisan Central Boards research them by hand to determine if the error is actually an over-vote or a stray mark. Resuming this practice not only allows us to capture an estimated 50,000 more votes, but it returns us to a nationally recognized best practice.

This will, of course, force us to hand-process about 100,000 more ballots, which is not easy work, but we have a staffing plan in place to meet these goals, including repurposing some of our voter registration temps for this purpose when their voter registration work is done.

Please let me jump back into the act of elections from the front-end, which is where we directly interact with the voters.

We have already had a healthy turnout for in-person voters and early ballots returned in person. We anticipate that as we open more vote centers, our volume will increase. Our heaviest sites are processing a couple hundred voters per day at this stage, but again, this volume is increasing.

As a side note, I have initiated a project to open four vote centers around the County to accommodate a "Souls to the Polls" program, if religious organizations or houses of worship want to promote it. We are open from 1-5 pm on Sunday, 10/28, at the following locations:

- Thunderbird Arts Center in far north Phoenix
- Elections Department office at Maricopa County Superior Court South East Complex just off Mesa Drive and the US-60
- Avondale City Hall has agreed to open their facility for this program to serve voters on the west side of the metro area, and
- Burton Barr Library on Central Avenue is available to serve the central core of Maricopa County

I'd like to take the time to thank all our vote center workers and others who have agreed to work on that Sunday to increase voter access.

Beyond that, we will have all 40 vote centers open on Wednesday October 31, November 1 and 2 to accommodate those people who want to vote early right before Election Day. We are encouraging as many people to vote as early as possible as we expect record turnout throughout this election and on Election Day. I encourage the public to visit locations.maricopa.vote to find vote center locations and hours of operation. Please take a moment to make a plan and vote.

Now on to Election Day planning and progress.

On Saturday, September 1, I assembled members of my senior management team and others in the Elections Department to review the successes and identify areas of improvement from the August 28 Primary Election.

We were in agreement that the record turnout, being 25% more than two years ago, and the speed with which we overcame significant challenges, really did speak to a story of success. We decided to reorganize the department in a way that would match the needs identified.

In that meeting, we realized that the Department, in spite of recent additions, was still severely understaffed. We reorganized our staffing to create a project manager for this election and I assigned the entire community relations team, members of my policy team and others from different areas to assist that person however needed. I put a hard stop on all that staff's normal and regularly planned activities and they were dedicated to planning for the General Election. I directed the entire institution to focus directly on the November election, while maintaining minimal statutory duties in other areas.

At the September 1 meeting, we identified that staffing and training were the most important issues. And we developed a plan for setting-up polling places on our own as the top priority.

Let me be clear about this idea of setting-up polling places. Our original plan was to have our Inspectors and Troubleshooters do the work before Election Day. The practice in past years was to have Election Day workers set-up all equipment, even the more technical equipment such as the old ePollbooks, the tabulation machines and the Edge alternative format voting machines. In fact, there was much internal discussion back in the spring and early summer months about the necessity of incurring the cost of using a contractor for equipment set-up. But worrying that the work was too technical for our own folks, and wanting to ensure that the set-up went smoothly with minimal technical problems, we decided to hire the contractor.

Our caution was rewarded with a material breach of contract, but our original plan was validated. Troubleshooters and Election Day workers who have taken the training have overwhelmingly indicated that they are comfortable with the equipment set-up. And many of them actually ended up trouble-shooting the equipment themselves on Primary Election Day.

So this transition year had yet another lesson learned...when you have thousands of people working with a system for the first time, you are going to have a bumpy start.

Thankfully, in November, every polling place will have at least one person present who worked the election in August. And the reception we have received from our Inspectors and Judges regarding our augmented training has been nothing short of phenomenal.

In all, we will be hiring nearly 4,000 people to make November 2018 a success. This includes 6 workers at each polling place and 240 Vote Center workers who will still be working their Centers on Election Day as they have done since early voting began in some cases. We will nearly double the number of Troubleshooters we have available on Election Day to handle any issues which may arise. Currently we have 88% of our Election Day poll workers hired and 95 of 125 Troubleshooters confirmed. There is a bank of potential workers being recruited as we speak to fill the empty slots. I am confident that we are on track to have the workers we need in place by Friday to run Election Day activities.

As for setting up our polling locations, most of the locations will be set up by the Troubleshooter or the Inspector assigned to that location. Additionally, our request for County employees to volunteer has yielded more than enough extra workers to help with this task. It has also yielded individuals with a technical background who will serve as IT Troubleshooters, on call to be dispatched to locations as needed to address more complicated technical issues, during set-up or on Election Day.

In fact, we had over 450 county employees respond to our request for volunteers. Some will be helping with the equipment set-up but many have agreed to be polling place workers. The support shown from their fellow County employees has been a huge morale boost for the Elections Department staff and is much appreciated. I would like to personally thank every County employee who has volunteered to help.

To further help ensure that we minimize problems first thing in the morning on Election Day, every site will be open to our staff at 5 am instead of 5:30 am. This will allow for an extra half-hour before the doors open to voters to run tests on the equipment (which should already have been tested the day before) and ensure that the whole operation is prepared by 6 am when voting starts at each site.

Along with a significant increase in Troubleshooters, we are deploying a network of support hubs with IT Troubleshooters, supplies, extra SiteBooks and other equipment at locations all around Maricopa County. The quick deployment of stuff and staff will help our polling locations experience the shortest amount of time for return to service if we have issues.

Of significant importance is the ongoing development of a monitoring system that will give us a real-time look at what is happening in every polling place. I will be happy to brief you on some of the very specific improvements in our monitoring capabilities in a closed setting, but for security reasons I am going to refrain from describing the whole system in this setting.

However, there is one aspect of the system that the public should be made aware of, and is incredibly important. We will be monitoring the length of our lines in every single polling location in real time.

To our knowledge, this is the first time in the history of American elections where we will have real-time information about the length of our voting lines in every polling location in the entire jurisdiction. Our SiteBook check-in system is the foundation for this new capacity.

Here's how that works: Each hour on the hour, the Marshal for each polling location will take one of these lanyards with this QR code on it and scan it on the SiteBook. The Marshal will then take the lanyard to the last voter in line (whether its two people or 200), and ask them to scan it when they get to the front of the line.

This will give us real-time monitoring capabilities for every single location. Let's say 30 minutes pass between the top of the hour and the last person scanning the QR code. That lets us know, without having to bother the poll workers, how long the line is.

If our system shows lines forming and wait times increasing, we will be able to call the polling place and ask if things are going well. We can respond immediately with back-up equipment or staff as necessary before the situation builds into something untenable.

Now, we all know that the 6 am hour is usually very busy, but we have never had the capacity to actually see it in action, live as it is happening, on a dashboard. Now we do.

This is one of the clearest indications that our entire process is focusing on the voter experience, accountability and security, which have been the three pillars of this administration from the beginning.

As for staffing, training and quality of locations, we are well on our way to making all of the appropriate adjustments.

We are using the same polling place map, and all but one of the same locations (we moved one location in Sup. Chucri's district at his office's request). We have evaluated each location's room capacity, work flow and connectivity and adjusted accordingly as needed to make sure that we have sufficient space for larger numbers of voters to be processed.

We have a high percentage of the same staff coming back that we used in August and we are in a place where these workers are now familiar with the SiteBooks and the processes that are to be used when helping voters.

We are requiring all Troubleshooters, Inspectors, Judges, IT Troubleshooters and any other people helping to set-up the equipment to attend in-person, revamped trainings. And we are requiring the Troubleshooters, Inspectors and Judges to also take the online training – also revamped – that the Marshals and Clerks take to create more continuity within the polling place team.

We have clarified in our training the processes and procedures for addressing emergency situations. We will move to a more proactive system of communicating from the command center to Troubleshooters and Inspectors at polling place sites to ensure that contingency measures, including checking-in voters off-line on the SiteBook, as well as use of paper rosters if necessary, are being implemented when needed.

Ultimately, we still have the 40 vote centers in place to handle any overflow needed if a particular polling place is not operable. And we have worked with our legal team to make it clear through training and the information provided on the SiteBook screens that voters at vote centers are not voting "provisionally" but rather voting an "out-of-precinct ballot," which is valid and will be counted like a regular ballot.

In all, this election will present some challenges. We do expect a significantly higher number of voters to vote on Election Day. Let me repeat, early voting will alleviate Election Day challenges for the office and for voters, and is already available all over Maricopa County. This election will likely break turn-out records for a mid-term election, and we are ready to meet all of those challenges.