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For immediate release

Enhancements to elections process will increase transparency

The Rice County Board of Commissioners approved a measure Tuesday that will increase transparency in local elections and the handling of absentee ballots.

The approval includes hiring four temporary election clerks to supplement county staff and installing a camera in the Elections Department conference room so members of the public can watch a live video feed as elections workers process, receive, and accept or reject absentee ballots.

The approved process is similar to those instituted in Ramsey and Olmsted counties. Those processes were challenged in court, but upheld by both the Minnesota Court of Appeals and Supreme Court.

Temporary election clerks have previously supplemented county staff, but this year those job postings will be sent to the state's four major political parties -- Democratic-Farmer-Labor, Grassroots Legalize Cannabis, Legal Marijuana Now and Republican -- to help assure party balance on the four absentee ballot boards.

An absentee board is needed for each election taking place in 2022: a special election to fill the unfinished term of the late U.S. Rep. Jim Hagedorn, the Primary Election and General Election. The fourth is for Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting (UOCAVA) ballots.

The temporary elections clerks will be asked to confidentially provide their party affiliation once they are hired, and will be scheduled to best achieve party balance during each shift.

State law allows full-time county Elections workers to process absentee ballots. Rice County has traditionally used its trained Elections staff members to conduct the process, ensuring ballots are accepted or rejected within the timeframe set out by state statute.

The board also approved the installation of a motion-sensing camera in the Elections Department conference room where ballots will be processed. A live feed of the proceedings will be displayed in a public viewing room in the Rice County Government Services Building.

Funding for the temporary clerks and video equipment is available in the 2022 Elections Department budget, according to Property Tax & Elections Director Denise Anderson.

Anderson on Tuesday said she plans to demonstrate the county's elections equipment at an upcoming Board of Commissioners work session.



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