

Draft, to be discussed at next Board of Registrars meeting



Belmont Board of Registrars of Voters
c/o Town Clerk's Office
Belmont Town Hall
Belmont, Massachusetts 02478

Belmont Select Board
Belmont Town Hall
Belmont, Massachusetts 02478

Re: Request for additional funding for new voting procedures

Dear Members of the Belmont Select Board,

To handle the added burden due to the new "Vote by Mail" state law, the Board of Registrars hereby requests the Select Board to authorize the Town Administrator to determine a source of funds now that may be needed for overtime in the Town Clerk's staff and for additional postage for outgoing ballots, and to authorize funds, if needed, to compensate additional part-time elections personnel to handle the elections paperwork. The problem is discussed more fully below.

New election laws provide for early mail-in voting, now known as "Vote by Mail," for both the September 1 State Primary and the November 3 General Election (which may also include the Town's Proposition 2½ Override Vote). Mainly due to very real COVID-19 risks, voting by mail has been expanded, authorized, and encouraged to avoid infecting election workers, as well as voters.

The new election law requires that the State Secretary mail a "Vote by Mail" application to **all** registered voters of the Commonwealth who have not already filed to receive a ballot by mail, but the voter must first submit the application to the Town Clerk. For Belmont, Belmont's nearly 18,000 voters began to receive these individualized applications from the State Secretary in the mail July 17-19.

The Belmont Board of Registrars of Voters fully endorses the "Vote by Mail" initiative. We note that more than 80%-85% of Belmont voters traditionally cast ballots in general (*i.e.*, presidential) elections, totaling some 15,000 ballots. A typical general election in the past usually includes about 3,000 absentee ballots. In addition to the absentee ballots, in the 2016 General Election, there

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were 6,400 In-Person Early Voting ballots cast in the Town Hall over a period of several days. This year the estimated additional 8,600 "Vote by Mail" ballots represent a 250% increase, just in volume of paperwork, not even accounting for the additional administrative steps required to mail and certify a mailed ballot.

None of this was anticipated and therefore was not included in the planning for the Town's FY21 budget.

To help the Select Board to appreciate the enormity of the problem, we set forth some of the details. Processing applications for ballots requires many steps, including receiving the mailed, emailed, and faxed applications, verifying signatures, verifying applicant's status as a registered voter, applying many individual labels to a myriad of envelopes and stuffing each envelope with the appropriate ballot, instructions, and return envelopes, recording the outgoing mailing for each voter, and then receiving the envelopes containing the ballots, verifying proper signatures and submittal of each ballot, recording the receipt of the ballots, sorting and batching the ballots by precincts, and physically securing the ballots until election day. Once the Town Clerk delivers the batched mailed ballots to their counting destination (e.g., one of the eight Precinct polling locations), each voter that submitted a ballot must be verified at the Precinct polling station and each envelope separately opened (while preserving the secrecy of the ballot) and the counts continuously verified.

All of this work to provide Vote-by-Mail ballots will be **in addition to** other election-related work, *i.e.*, answering of calls, emails, and visits from voters seeking to verify their voting status, changing political party designations, planning and handling logistics for the required, now-expanded In-Person Early Voting period for each election (further described below), and the planning and logistics of Election Day itself. Adding to the election-related workload is the fact that the technical (and tedious) on-line computer work to verify and certify voters is only accessible to registered, trained members of the Town Clerk's office staff, who utilize computers that are hard-wired to the State's Central Voter Registry; and for cybersecurity concerns, this work cannot be performed anywhere except at those connected work stations in the Town Clerk's office.

NOTE: The deadline to request an absentee ballot **in person** is noon the day before the election, which could also create an additional crush of demands on the Town Clerk's staff.

In addition to all of the mailed ballots, the Legislature **added in-person Early Voting for the September 1st State Primary and added days, including Sundays, to the in-person Early Voting for the November 3rd General Election** in the Town

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Hall, which will require around-the-clock, continuous work by the Town Clerk's staff, on these dates: Saturday August 22-28, and October 17-25.

And the election-related work is in addition to, the normal workload of the Town Clerk's office (marriage licenses, up-dating census records, birth, death, and marriage certificates, dog licenses, public meeting notices and minutes, processing business licenses and permits, handling warrants for town meeting (a September Special Town Meeting is now contemplated), public document requests, etc.).

COVID-19 has reduced availability of election workers, as well. The Registrars also note that many of Belmont's election workers are over the age of 65 and are therefore considered especially vulnerable, and many are reluctant to be exposed to COVID-19 in the polling locations. For the June 23rd Town Election, only 26 of Belmont's 135 trained poll workers were available, requiring us to scramble for volunteers and additional workers just to run the 10 am to 2 pm election, and to process the absentee ballots, with only a total 12% voter turnout.

To protect election workers, and to ensure that voters can exercise their right to vote in these important 2020 elections, we request that the Select Board join us to strongly encourage all Belmont voters (a) to submit promptly their applications for absentee and "Vote by Mail" ballots, AND (b) to vote and submit their ballots promptly.

Depending on what further State regulations will require, it is a certainty that more workers will be needed to handle the added burden of processing the anticipated volume of mailed requests. AND, if voters delay and submit Vote by Mail applications near the deadline, there will be a crush of applications to process, which will leave insufficient time to process the applications and mail out the ballots in time for the voter to complete the ballot, and submit the ballot by the close of polls on election day. The goal is to process the voter's request and mail the ballot to voter in time for the voter to receive the ballot, vote it, and return it before the deadline. With just four full-time staff working in the Town Clerk's office, and with the elimination of all overtime for the Town Clerk's staff, Belmont is already understaffed to process and mail 15,000 ballots on time.

The Town Clerk informed the Board of Registrars that she has strongly advocated with both Senator Brownsberger and Representative Rogers, the need for additional funding to all local election offices to support the new election laws. We know that every city and town is in the same boat; Belmont is no different. It is likely that these new additional dates and requirements could be determined to be an unfunded mandate by the State Auditor; however, we still need to perform the work now.

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Any State grants provided for elections or Early Voting use will of course be deployed for this purpose. Ellen O'Brien Cushman, Town Clerk, has informed the Board that she has already spoken to Town Administrator Patrice Garvin to be able to utilize Town employees from other departments to perform some of this work during the August to November 3rd period and Mr. Garvin has fully committed that some employees will be made available. The Board of Registrars is concerned, however, that those Town employees already have employment commitments that may prevent them from being fully available at the times required. They will also need to be extensively trained before they can begin to help. We therefore seek permission to utilize our existing corps of election workers to handle the mailing of ballots and perform non-technology work to help get the ballots "out the door" and "back in." The Registrars will also be available to assist in performing some of this work.

The Board reiterates its notice to the Select Board that Belmont's remaining elections of 2020 are in jeopardy; we must work together to make them successful. We know that the Select Board joins the Board of Registrars of Voters in our desire to see that every voter who wants to vote receives a ballot to do so; either by mail, in person at Early Voting, or on Election Day. Collectively, we must act now to prevent voters being "turned away" due to lack of funding, which could be interpreted by some to be "voter suppression."

Please direct Town Administrator Garvin to identify promptly additional sources of funds to fully support the 2020 elections during this extraordinary pandemic.

Sincerely,

BELMONT BOARD OF REGISTRARS OF VOTERS

Robert E. McGaw, Chair

Stanley Dzierzeski, Vice Chair

Stephen Shestakofsky