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Yavapai County Elections officials confident this year's balloting will be secure

By STEVE SHADLEY The Verde Independent

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Yavapai County Recorder Michelle Burchill speaks at a public meeting at Verde Village on upcoming elections on Wednes[...] 2024. (VVN/Steven Shadley)

COTTONWOOD — Yavapai County officials are trying to assure voters the upcoming elections will be fair and transparent in the wake of nationwide conspiracy theories that alleged the 2020 presidential election was rigged and fraught with unproven instances of voter fraud.

Yavapai County Recorder Michelle Burchill and Yavapai Director of Elections Laurin Custis presented an update on election preparations at a public meeting in Verde Village on Wednesday evening, June 12.

"We've heard a lot of weird stuff," said Burchill. "We are battling misinformation everyday but the more we present the facts and the more people who talk to us, I think we are educating and building more trust in the elections process."

Burchill and Custis presented a slide show to explain the painstaking steps they will take to ensure every vote is counted accurately during Arizona's July 30 primary and general election on Nov. 5, 2024.

"All ballots will be machine tabulated, and we will make regular audits of random races to make sure the ballot numbers match up exactly," Custis said. "In Yavapai County ballots are organized into batches and if there are any discrepancies in vote tallies then we will delete the vote count for that specific batch and count over again until the numbers clearly match up."

Members from the opposing political parties will be present at tabulation sites at locations away from polling places monitoring vote counts as another safeguard against potential ballot tampering or tally inaccuracies. Yavapai County polling places will use Unisyn OpenElect Voting Systems.

"We've had no problems with Unisyn in the past, since 2016," Custis said.

As for those controversial "drop boxes" where voters can deposit their ballots at select site across Yavapai County leading up to Election Day, there are no security concerns, according to Burchill and Custis.

"These drop boxes are fool proof. Nobody can open them without a special key. They can't sabotage ballots by pouring a milkshake into the slot on the boxes. They each have a fire suppression system within to prevent vandalism, and we don't even advertise when we will be picking up ballots from these boxes to keep your ballots safe," Burchill said.

"Different groups have approached us asking if they can guard the drop boxes, but we try to discourage that by explaining the pros and cons. These drop boxes are secure on their own," Burchill stated.

When it comes to the computers used to do the actual vote count, Custis presented photo examples of laptops that will each be fitted with custom port blocks to prevent anyone from trying to hook up an outside electronic device.

"All of the wiring to and from all elections computers are exposed so people can see how the wiring is routed. There are no wires plugged into a wall where you can't see where they go. There are no secrets," Custis added.

Meanwhile, Burchill encouraged voters to put their marked ballots into county labeled drop boxes instead of a U.S. Postal Service mail box.

"I cannot vouch for the chain of custody in the mail. Think about this, a mail carrier handles your ballot, it goes to a postal station for sorting by other people, and someone can steal stuff out of a mail box. At least with the Yavapai drop boxes we know who's handing those ballots," Burchill said.

There will be 27 vote centers across Yavapai County on Election Day, and the local elections offices have hired dozens of seasonal workers to process ballots and about 300 people to staff polling places.

"I've only had one worker express that she may not come back this year because she's afraid of what could happen," Custis said, considering a few threats around 2020 against elections workers nationwide.

All Yavapai elections staff are fully vetted and must pass background checks before they can start work.

Anyone who wants to monitor the ballot counting process in Yavapai County can do so in-person behind a barrier window at the tabulation center or live stream the action from a home computer or smart phone.

"We are under a lot of pressure to get this right, a super amount of pressure, there is zero room for error," Burchill said.

"The only unanswered question, at his point, is whether the general election ballot will be in two parts due to the long list of candidates and proposals, and that might lead to long lines at polling places on Election Day. But, we are still not sure what that general election ballot will look like exactly, and we probably won't know until after July 11," Custis said.

Most everyone who attended Wednesday's meeting said they are convinced the local elections will be secure.

"I've attended three of these sessions so far and now I'm even more confident we will have a safe election. There's a lot of apathy about elections in general, and if people continue to feel that way, we're screwed," said Charles Mackey, a Verde Village resident.

Twelve out of Arizona's 15 counties will have new elections officials in office when voters cast ballots later this year.

"We are all are working together to share ideas on how to make this system work. We rely on each other," said Burchill, who is running unopposed as a Republican candidate for Yavapai County Recorder and will not be allowed in the vote counting rooms on election night because her name appears on the ballot.

"I am a conservative and I was highly skeptical about this process until I became recorder, now that I know how it works I'm confident democracy is working in Yavapai County," Burchill said.

Go to yavapaivotes.gov for more information on this year's primary and general elections.

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