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Brunswick elections director fails to get commissioner approval for all requested positions | Port City Daily

By
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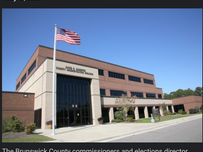

The Brunswick County commissioners and elections director reached a compromise Wednesday over the number of additional positions to fund in the next budget cycle. (Courtesy Brunswick County)

BRUNSWICK COUNTY — The Brunswick County commissioners and elections director reached a compromise Wednesday over the number of additional positions to fund in the next budget cycle.

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Director of Elections Sara LaVere requested the county fund two new full-time positions at the board of elections. Ultimately, commissioners only agreed to one — though that is half a position more than what was in the county manager's recommended budget.

LaVere requested at a budget workshop meeting this week for a combined voter outreach and communication position, along with a candidate coordinator to bring her full-time staff up to eight.

"I have really tried to manage the increase in registered voters, the increased workload, the increased demands with temporary and part-time staff," LaVere said. "We have reached a point where that is becoming more complicated."

The board of elections has not added a full-time position since 2016, when the county's population had 52,000 less people. LaVere said the county's registered voter count rose 45% in the last eight years, up to around 132,000.

The voter outreach position would plan events and social media content to engage and educate the community on the election process, as well as handle media and public records requests. The latter has increased in frequency and volume, LaVere said, and because they almost always require redaction of personal information, it's a task that's becoming harder to keep on LaVere's to-do list.

The other position, a candidate coordinator, would solely focus on walking candidates through the election process. That responsibility is now given to the employee managing the absentee ballots and financials of the office.

"We really need someone that can focus primarily on assisting candidates and making sure campaign finance reports are audited timely," LaVere said.

But adding two positions don't fit in with the commissioners' vision of the 2024-2025 budget.

"It is a strong budget and it's a time where we are trying to make sure that we recognize for the citizens the issue about not increasing taxes," commissioner Randy Thompson said.

Under the current proposal, the commissioners are not planning a change to the current property tax rate of 0.34 cents.

The commissioners asked LaVere if she could combine the duties of the two requested positions into one.

"You know if you're willing to compromise on one versus two, I can make that work," LaVere said.

The additional funds needed to accommodate the full-time position, along with increases in costs due to the implementation of the state's voter I.D. law and the conduction of this year's second primary election, comes out to a little more than $200,000.

"I think that the outreach part, especially now that I hear more about what you have planned, I do think it's so important," commissioner Frank Williams said. "Because you can read so much misleading garbage about our election process on Nextdoor.com almost every day, that we need to be pulling out correct information in order to protect the integrity of what we're doing here in Brunswick County."

Commissioner Pat Sykes had one idea for reducing costs: reduce the number of early voting days.

"It's a waste of time and money," Sykes said.

She recommended the North Carolina Association of Directors of Elections, of which LaVere is president, to look at the number of early voting days.

LaVere said there's been no discussion of changing the 17-day mandate — it tends to get political, per LaVere — but she is exploring more autonomy in early voting hours. In Brunswick County, she said, there's rarely enough people in the later evening hours to justify the resources to stay open.

Sykes' comments mirror those made by fellow Republican, New Hanover County Board of Elections member Tom Morris. A couple weeks ago, he said the GOP was having a hard time staffing poll workers to reach parity with those of the other party and blamed the length of early voting days.

An agreement on LaVere's request was reached, but the Brunswick County Democratic Party issued a statement ahead of Monday's meeting criticizing the commissioners for not complying with her request.

"Given our growth, the increased complexity of new voting laws and the resulting expanded workload, this is an unreasonable and very difficult position for the BOE," Democratic Party Chair Shelley Allen said.

The release also states that county commissioners chastised the BOE for accepting money from the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence, a nonpartisan voting advocacy organization, but "promised they would provide whatever money the BOE needed to operate."

Last year, commissioners passed a resolution pressuring the board of elections to terminate its membership in the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence, as well as oppose private money in elections (elections boards now cannot accept private funding per state law).

The U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence, which funnels election process improvement resources and networking opportunities to local election offices across the nation, is nonpartisan. Yet, Brunswick commissioners, all Republican, claimed the group's indirect ties to Mark Zuckerberg and other liberal tech billionaires compromised the office's reputation and opened the election process up to liberal influence.

According to LaVere, the elections office accepted a $67,000 grant to hire temporary employees to facilitate absentee ballots, which increased exponentially amid the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

The board voted 3-2 to reject the commissioner's resolution. However, the board pulled out of the alliance after the North Carolina General Assembly passed a law prohibiting the use of private funds in elections last fall.

Port City Daily reached out to the Brunswick County GOP for comment on the board of elections funding but did not get a response by press.

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