

Don Campbell / HP file photo

Residents vote at the Zion St. Joe United Church of Christ in St. Joseph in 2020. Berrien County and its 31 municipalities are expected to offer early day voting for elections starting in 2024.

Expanding to early voting

Southwest Michigan clerks prep for 2024 election changes

By **ROBERT NOVAK**
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Berrien County and its accompanying municipalities are in the process of figuring out how to implement nine days of early voting in 2024.

In November 2022, Michiganders voted in favor of Proposal 2, which aims to expand voter access to the polls. One of the ways Prop 2 works is by requiring at least nine days of early voting for all state and federal elections.

“With the nine days, people can pick what day and what time works with their schedule,” said Stacy Loar-Porter, chair of the Berrien County Clerks Association and Lincoln Township clerk. “It’s a huge advantage and it’s worked in a lot of other states that have been doing it for a really long time.”

Loar-Porter said some of Michigan’s bigger college towns plan to have up to 28 days of early voting, but it’s not so easy for smaller counties with less resources.

Early voting

Nine days of early voting in Berrien County will be at Lake Michigan College in Benton Township and the South County Courthouse in Niles.

Benton and Bainbridge townships will host their own early voting sites.

It will start two Saturdays prior to an election and be open 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily, except Wednesday (11 a.m.-7 p.m.) through the Sunday prior to the election.

Early voting won’t be implemented into an election within Michigan until the 2024 presidential primary.

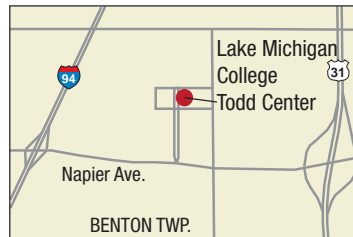
Even with the election months away, Berrien County clerks have been working since Prop 2 passed to ensure all 31 jurisdictions have a successful nine days of early voting.

The cost of voting

Between the cost of barcode

scanners, tabulators, ballot bags, secrecy sleeves and even the “I voted” stickers, conducting early voting for nine straight days gets expensive quickly.

The Berrien County Clerk’s Office estimated the cost of early voting to be about \$2,000 for smaller jurisdictions with less registered voters, like Galien and Coloma. However, the price for large jurisdictions – such as Niles and Benton Township



HP graphic

Early day voting numbers

According to data from the Berrien County Clerk’s Office, the following 10 municipalities have the most registered voters in the county as of 2022:

- Benton Township:** 12,638 voters
- Niles Township:** 12,380 voters
- Lincoln Township:** 12,331 voters
- City of Niles:** 10,513 voters
- St. Joseph Township:** 8,925 voters
- City of Benton Harbor:** 8,137 voters
- City of St. Joseph:** 7,266 voters
- Oronoko Township:** 5,981 voters
- Coloma Township:** 4,434 voters
- Royalton Township:** 4,138 voters

– is estimated to be more than \$20,000.

A large portion of the costs would be a one-time expense, but large jurisdictions would have

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more than \$5,000 in early voting expenses for every state and federal election.

Fortunately, the state allows each county to apply for the Michigan Department of State and Bureau of Election Early Voting Implementation Grant.

Berrien County is expected to receive the grant to support a majority of the early voting costs on behalf of the municipalities. Based on the estimated implementation costs for all 31 jurisdictions, Berrien County requested about \$242,000 for the grant.

“We know we’ll receive at least 80 percent of the grant money,” Loar-Porter said.

With 80 percent of the grant awarded, the remaining costs are estimated to be about \$73,000 for the entire county. This would mean larger municipalities would pay around \$7,000, and smaller jurisdictions would pay less than \$1,000.

The three options

Every jurisdiction has three options when it comes to early voting: conduct early voting on their own, partner with other municipalities or partner with the county.

There are a lot of advantages to partnering with the county, Loar-Porter said. The most apparent being the financial aspect.

Berrien County prioritizes the money received from the grant to municipalities partnered with them, she said. In fact, the county is able to award more grant money to each jurisdiction when more jurisdictions partner with them.

“Most of it is because of the one-time costs,” Loar-Porter said. “The more townships there are to share those big-ticket items, the more grant money there is leftover.”

Additionally, she said the county offers a large staffing pool, which makes it easier for municipalities to find poll workers, election inspectors and security.

“I have six precincts, so on a big election day I’ll have 75 to 80 workers,” Loar-Porter said. “That’s hard enough to find those



Don Campbell / HP staff

Residents can vote early this year at The Todd Center, located on the campus of Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor.



Don Campbell / HP file photo

“I Voted” stickers are handed out as residents vote in 2022.

workers for a day. It would be a lot for me to find additional or to ask those 80 workers to work eight hours a day for nine days before.”

‘Never dealt with before’

Out of the 31 jurisdictions within Berrien County, only two have decided to conduct early voting on their own – Bainbridge and Benton townships.

Bainbridge is a small township with about 2,200 registered voters. According to data from the Berrien County Clerk’s Office, Bainbridge Township makes up only 1.66 percent of all the registered voters within the county.

Bainbridge Township Clerk Patty Hiler-Molter said they’ll be able to employ election workers using only their current staff and some additional trained

personnel who expressed interest. She also said security will be implemented the same as it is every election.

In contrast, Benton Township is one of the largest municipalities in the county with 12,638 registered voters – making up nearly 10 percent of all voters in the county.

While there are many advantages to partnering with the county, there are also disadvantages. Benton Township officials said they did not want to hold early voting anywhere other than their township hall.

“We anticipate problems and issues we’ve never dealt with before,” Benton Township Clerk Carolyn Phillips said. “And the best way for my office to deal with what might arise is managing early voting at the township hall.”

Phillips said she plans to reassign some current staff to work the election, however, she also expects to hire external poll workers. She said security will be handled by the Benton Township Police Department, as well as an outside security agency.

Bainbridge and Benton townships will hold their nine days of early voting at their own precincts. But the 29 other jurisdictions will conduct early voting at one of the two county polling designated locations.

Berrien County has chosen polling sites in the southern and northern halves of the county. The north county polling site will be at Lake Michigan College’s Todd Center, while the southern county polling site will be at the Niles courthouse.

Loar-Porter said there has been hesitation, nervousness and excitement on how Michigan’s first experience with early voting will play out.

“I think the scariest thing for all of us clerks is that legislation is taking so long,” she said. “Like, we constitutionally have to provide early voting, but we have no process for it yet because the bills aren’t in effect. But I love a new challenge and I love this kind of stuff. We’re lucky to have really good clerks and a really strong association in Berrien County.”

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