

Buncombe County Board of Elections
Asheville/Buncombe County Board of Elections

Monitor Name: Aiden Carson, Elaine and George Elam, and Cheryl Williams in person

Date & Time: January 8, 2025 2:00 PM

Names of Board Members Attending:

Jake Quinn, Chairman

Mary Ann Braine, Board Member

Steven Aceto, Board Member

Glen Shults, Secretary

Sally Stein: Board Member

Names of Buncombe Co Staff Attending:

Corrine Duncan, Director; Anna Katherine Moore, Administrative Coordinator and Clerk to the Board; Victoria Pickens, Accounting Technician and Campaign Finance; Neggy Fox, Deputy Director; Justin Tate, Absentee Coordinator; Bria Bailey, Elections Technical Specialist; Karen Rae, Elections Coordinator; Nathaniel Speier, Candidate Coordinator; Justin Tate, Absentee Coordinator; Amy Meier, Voter Registration Coordinator; Ryan

Location of Meeting: 59 Woodfin Place, Asheville NC

Observers:

At least 8 in person including 4 LWVAB, plus 1 Common Cause, 2 Republicans, and 1 with unknown affiliation. In addition, 2 attended online.

I. Agenda for this meeting approved without objection

II. Minutes (G.S. § 143-318.10)

- Passed by acclamation for 12/18

III. Office Updates – Corrine Duncan, Director

- Ms. Duncan reported that some Elections Services staff were helping Health and Human Services with the housing program
- All Elections Services staff were in the office together on Monday, January 6
- Elections Services will participate in 2 budget meetings over the next couple of weeks and develop priorities for the upcoming year

IV. Elections Facilities Discussion – Corrine Duncan, Director

- The primary reason for today’s meeting is to develop a list of concerns about the proposed move of Elections Services to 35 Woodfin Street in March 2025 to share with County Managers
 - Ms. Stein asked whether any changes had been made to the maps used at the prior presentation. Ms. Duncan said no

- Mr. Quinn said he had taken a self-initiated tour of the building, which is open to the public but the tour did nothing to allay his concerns, including that the “lobby” is not designed to hold a great many people.
- Mr. Shults asked whether the space on the second floor had a bank of windows. Ms. Duncan said yes. He additionally asked whether the space on the west side had windows. Ms. Duncan said yes but they look out over the College Street parking garage.
- He also asked about a stair well. Ms. Braine said she thought it was a fire exit meaning that staff from other offices would have access to it.
- In addition, he questioned how people would know where to go to access the Elections Services staff. Ms. Duncan said drop down signs would direct people to various election services.
- Ms. Duncan said there were two entrance doors, one on Woodfin Street and one behind the College Street Garage across the courtyard.
- Mr. Quinn said entering the building is like walking into a hallway with offices everywhere and no public area per se.
- Mr. Quinn said the Board and staff should state their concerns but not be proscriptive about how to address them as one goal is to hear from County Managers what the long-range strategy is and how this move fits into it.
 - Moreover, he knows of no other use for 59 Woodfin Place so staying in this building is an option until more clear communication has been established about why this move is necessary.
- Ms. Braine said that Election Services is spread out over 3 floors with no secure access between the areas, only two of which are consolidated. Security for sensitive documents such as ballots and registration forms is not guaranteed.
 - Mr. Aceto pointed out that in a time of heightened concern over election integrity even the optics of conducting elections work in a non-secured area could undermine public confidence. Without secured office space, the Board and staff are in the position of having to prove a negative (how does one demonstrate that only authorized staff have access to ballots and other sensitive voter data when offices are in 3 locations), which is virtually impossible.
- Mr. Quinn proposed working with Ms. Moore to draft a letter of concern based on the primary concerns of security for sensitive information, efficiency of elections operations, and customer service that enhances or maintains public confidence.
- Ms. Duncan said that the starting point should be what is best for this office and its operations then outlined a history of moves the office has experienced since 2020.
 - The ideal is to have a separate building for Elections Services, which many counties do, such as Wake and Catawba.
 - Around 2023 that was the plan with \$18 million earmarked for construction. She was never given an explanation for why that plan changed.

- She thinks the facilities staff prefer this proposal because the number of elections staff changes in response to election demands; it expands for large elections and shrinks in between elections.
- She does not think facilities staff are aware of the need for security over documents such as absentee ballots during processing, the need for privacy for staff to discuss sensitive information related to ballots and correcting deficiencies, and that staff operate equipment to provide IDs to voters.
- Moreover, election laws often change, usually adding to the staff workload without providing additional resources. For example, photo ID has been implemented but signature verification may soon be required. Some of their equipment needs to be moved around and always staff must conduct their work quickly and accurately.
- Elections staff and workers are often in the public eye in ways that differ from public interest in other county functions. Control over our space and how we conduct our work is vital, which is true for all county Boards of Elections and staff.
- Prior to November 2021 when remodeling of 59 Woodfin Place was completed, the office was moved into the warehouse on Coxe Avenue after they had to move from 77 McDowell Street because of mold issues. The current situation is ideal, literally the best space they have had.
- She and staff have provided quite a bit of data on two separate occasions to facilities staff but they have never heard how the data were used or why a second submission of data was required in January 2023. It has been very frustrating to meet with the same people over the issue but then to not learn from them how the plan is progressing. Now some of the key staff have changed. She has never heard what the plans are for 59 Woodfin Place. As a result, she is uncertain whether staying at Woodfin Place is an option.
- A housing project has been approved for Coxe Street which means the current warehouse there will move to County-owned property near the Craggy Corrections Center on Canoe Lane, making it less accessible for the various meetings and testing that occurs during elections.
- Ms. Stein said security of the space and documents they handle is essential.
- Mr. Aceto said that the entire nation is exploring the balance between security and transparency in elections. In his view, one must describe the space before addressing whether and how it can be secured.
- Ms. Braine asked what agencies Elections staff would interact with daily, as there is no advantage in proximity to other departments that Elections staff do not interact with. She noted that the proposal to have the staff spread out across three floors in non-contiguous space seems inefficient and overly complicated. In addition, during elections we have many people coming and going.

- Mr. Aceto requested that staff provide numbers of seasonal staff to the facilities people so they might understand the fluctuations of seasonal staff and the risks of having people carry equipment and documents in shared stairwells.
- Ms. Duncan noted the following concerns: the lobby is not ideal for their uses, there is no space in which to hold early voting which adds to the cost for municipalities conducting elections because space will have to be rented (already a very difficult task), and security is compromised by moving staff and equipment around often.
 - Mr. Aceto noted that moving ballots around creates the impression of a lack of security. We forfeit public confidence because we don't control the space. Without control over the space, we can't prove that no one but authorized staff accessed ballots and other documents. Municipal officials are not going to be happy to get a bill they didn't budget for because Elections Services no longer has space to host early voting in municipal elections.
 - Ms. Braine pointed out that any concerns over extra costs may be directed toward County Commissioners rather than the Elections Board and staff.
 - Mr. Shults said that the cubicle space looks very cramped in an area without much natural light which could lead to lower morale and the risk of inefficient and/or inaccurate work.
 - Ms. Stein expressed hope that County managers would let Elections Services stay at 59 Woodfin Place if they are able to sufficiently articulate their concerns.
 - Mr. Aceto suggested boiling the concerns down to a small number of bumper stickers that folks could put on their cars: Accessibility for both the public and staff, Transparency of operations, Optics of security and election integrity, Increased expenses to municipalities, and Shared use of a Board room.
 - Mr. Quinn said Mr. Shults' observation that the work space is worse than the current condition with negative effects to morale and output for a high performing team that has never let folks down.
 - Mr. Aceto also said the providing the correct space with the correct security may help the Board and staff repeat and possibly build on the record 75 percent turnout of the November election.
 - Ms. Braine asked whether space on the first floor is adequate for candidate filing. Ms. Duncan said it was for elections with a small number of candidates but not for bigger elections because candidates like to bring their families and campaign staff when they file. Also, while the pattern of candidates coming in on either the first or the last day of the filing period held for many years, it has begun to extend throughout the filing period.
- Ms. Duncan said another concern was the lack for room to expand staff numbers at 35 Woodfin Street because her belief is that the team is more

highly productive, collegial, innovative, and collaborative when they are together every day. Elections staff do not work remotely. She is not certain whether any space allotted to other agencies is held in reserve to encourage staff who work remotely to return to the office. If so, then it's possible the space will go unused. County management may not share her views on the importance of in person work to boost team morale.

- Ms. Braine asked whether County facilities staff could provide numbers of remote workers who need to have space in the office. Ms. Duncan thought so. She also expressed concerns about whether people would leave shared spaces the same way they found them or whether staff would be required to move furniture and equipment around each time they use the space.
- Mr. Quinn said that we need improved communication between the office and the County. It seems clear the County has a specific goal in mind but no one on the Board or staff knows what that big picture is. He believes County managers have respect for the Elections Office and Board. He also wants to know how the need for meetings at the warehouse will be accommodated, especially if it moves to Canoe Lane.
- Mr. Aceto thought it might be helpful if other stakeholders, such as the party chairs and organizations such as Common Cause and LWV shared any concerns they have about the move.
 - During public comment Common Cause asked what stakeholders would they contact. Ms. Duncan said they would reach out to the party chairs.
- Ms. Duncan and Mr. Shults invited staff to mention any concerns that were missed.
 - Morgan Chance reported that she and Karen Rae had a difficult time locating training space prior to the November election and received no help from the County. Mr. Quinn asked whether they would use the shared space at 35 Woodfin Street. Ms. Chance said yes, if they could reserve it.
 - Ms. Duncan suggested offering to swap out the space in the basement to consolidate operations on the second floor.
 - Ms. Rae noted that staff currently have “spread out” space on which to lay documents and other information pertinent to the many phone calls they make in a day. In addition, she is concerned that cubicles will not have such space and are unsuitable for discussions involving personal data.
 - Mr. Shults said having documents out raises concerns about the extent to which others might have access to the information on them.
 - Mr. Aceto said it may also raise concerns about voter intimidation if people do not feel their personal information is securely handled.
 - Ms. Fox said that the seasonal staff for elections will be housed in the shared space used by other agencies. Often these are repeat staff from prior years who now have assigned desks where they can store materials.
 - Mr. Whitney said the use of a shared space for conferences has the potential to be very inefficient because audio visual equipment and live streaming require various settings to ensure they work properly. If the

agencies do not share protocols much time could be wasted with recalibrating equipment which should always be left in place and connected.

- Mr. Quinn noted that we need cameras facing both the Board and the rest of the room where the public sits which further complicates our needs.
- Ms. Duncan said the modular lay out of the shared conference room because it means equipment will be moved around which makes her nervous that workflow could be interrupted.
- Ms. Braine asked how many other Boards that use 35 Woodfin Street live stream their meetings. Ms. Duncan did not know.
- Mr. Quinn said he would work with Ms. Moore to draft the concerns expressed and distribute the summary to Board members so that it could be an agenda item for the meeting on Monday, January 13.

V. Next Meeting: Monday, January 13, 2025 at 3:30

- **Location 59 Woodfin Place**