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## Making every vote count: Election Day starts complicated process of determining winners

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OROVILLE — Dropping a ballot in the ballot box may be the last step for a Butte County voter, but it's only the first for the Butte County Elections Division.

As candidates anxiously gather to see first reports of tallies and average citizens get ready to head to bed, elections officials get to work.

And with the nature of elections these days, they don't stop until weeks after the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

A few days after the election, Butte County Clerk-Recorder Candace Grubbs invited the Enterprise-Record to watch the process of counting ballots and chip in with some of the tasks associated with the daunting endeavor.

Almost three weeks since voters hit the polls, Butte County residents are still waiting for the election's final results.

But after witnessing the vote count firsthand, it's amazing the county is able to report the results in the month of November at all.

It's not the inefficiency of the county's staff— it's the multitude of steps a ballot takes to wind up as a counted vote.

Election Central

Walking into the Butte County Elections Office three days after an election is anticlimactic.

Though the small office space saw approximately 900 voters walk through the doors Monday and Tuesday to drop off mail ballots, by Friday, the only people in the office are paid to be there.

Grubbs, though exhausted from sleepless nights of overseeing ballot processing, is cheerful as she opens the

door to a separate room off the left side of the main office entrance.

A dozen people are quietly working on various tasks, with the only noise in the room coming from the ballots being run through an optical scan machine.

Seated at one table are four elections workers, who methodically check each ballot for any stray marks that could impact the tally.

On election night, Grubbs said, all ballots are quickly run through the scan machine.

But some may not count if a voter incorrectly filled in the ballot bubbles or created additional marks on the ballot.

On this day, workers are looking at ballots from Paradise precincts, searching for the pen marks that could mean a vote wasn't counted.

Over the course of the election tallying process, these workers will see every one of the tens of thousands ballots cast in Butte County.

A cardboard box of ballots from a particular

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precinct is dropped off at the table, with each person taking a stack of ballots and counting them.

The number is entered onto a sheet that keeps track of the ballot counts for each precinct.

Looking through the ballots is an easy task, but one that quickly becomes mundane.

After about 100 ballots, there isn't much excitement left in the job.

There is some humor though.

Though most voters complete their ballot without error, some voters blatantly disregard the instructions for filling in the bubbles.

One voter made large X's through each selection. Another didn't fill the bubbles in all the way. One ballot had check marks in the bubbles.

Yet, Butte County Elections still ensures that these ballots get counted.

Deena Ainsworth, a temporary employee, sits at one end of the table, correcting ballots.

If elections staff and Ainsworth determine someone intended to cast a vote for a candidate— like making X's through a bubble — Ainsworth puts correction tape over the mark and fills in bubble correctly.

Once the ballot is corrected, it runs through the scan machine nearby and is processed with the rest of the votes from the precinct.

'Meticulous' process

During the course of 90 minutes, Ainsworth sits in the same spot, correcting ballots as they come her way.

A stay-at-home mother of two, Ainsworth started her job a week before the election.

With her youngest now in preschool, Ainsworth said she decided to go through a temporary employment agency to keep her days occupied.

As an elections worker, the Chico resident certainly has stayed busy.

Though she may not find the position challenging, Ainsworth is dedicated, taking pause with each ballot she holds.

"It's not difficult work," Ainsworth said. "It's just meticulous."

Meticulous is the best way to describe the activity in the room.

Two workers scan ballots through the machine for the second time since election night, in order to double check tallies and include corrected ballots.

If a ballot doesn't go through for some reason, they stop to look at it, and make sure there are no marks that the table of four didn't catch minutes before.

Another team of two work to make duplicates for ballots that are torn or damaged and can't be counted.

They aren't allowed to simply grab an extra ballot.

Instead, they log the ballot number and precinct, grab a special duplicate ballot that is a different color and fill it in according to the voter's original choices.

The old, damaged ballots are kept in an envelope and each person reads back the voter's choice in each race, to make sure no errors are made.

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The process is completely perfunctory, devoid of politics.

In fact, Robin Lee, deputy county clerk, said although the clerk's office is in the business of elections, the candidates and measures on the ballot are never discussed.

"We don't even talk about politics at work," Lee said. "We talk about elections."

Mail-in ballots add wrinkle

Across the freeway in an old bank building, two charismatic women are handling the mail ballots.

Butte County saw an unprecedented number of mail ballots turned in on election day, with an estimated 13,500 ballots dropped off at the polls or collected from post offices on Nov. 2.

And though the elections workers at County Center are deep into the tallying process, here, the mail ballots won't be scanned and counted for days.

"It's great to see so many people vote like this," Grubbs said as she stood in front of a stack of blue envelopes holding mail ballots. "But people need to realize that if they choose to drop off ballots the day of an election, it does slow down the process."

Part of that process includes verifying each signature on every envelope received.

Though the old bank building is almost empty, there is a computer in the office that holds each registered voter's signature.

Any signature that doesn't match is put into a pile, and an elections official calls to verify that the voter did send in a ballot.

If they didn't, the vote isn't counted.

If they did, they are advised to update their signature, which Grubbs admits can change with age.

Voting equipment needs attention, too

After zipping over to the mail center, Grubbs drives a few miles to check in on the Elections Office warehouse on Table Mountain Boulevard.

Here, equipment is being checked in and cleaned.

Some of that equipment includes the electronic voting stations the county bought years ago in an effort to update the county's election process.

But Grubbs said when Secretary of State Debra Bowen de-certified the use of the touchscreens (Grubbs said they have only been re-certified on a smaller scale), many were put out of use.

After seeing the complexity of counting paper ballots, it's easy to see why Grubbs wanted to shift Butte County to a electronic voting system.

Grubbs estimates a general election in Butte County costs \$800,000 to hold, with a large portion of that budget funding 700 staff members brought in to run precincts and check and count ballots.


And though there are concerns electronic voting could lose the trail associated with voting on a paper ballot, Grubbs said with the right technology that wouldn't be a problem.

"The public should demand a better process," Grubbs said. "We're supposed to be a leader in elections for the world. We should be a leader. And we're not."

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Additionally, Grubbs said the state has halted funding to update the equipment it does have.

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The scanning machines do look antiquated and Grubbs said in the interest of democracy, money should be dedicated to ensuring the voting process is the best it can be.

"We're struggling," Grubbs said. "We need new equipment. We need to improve the equipment we have."

And though she praises her dedicated staff and their tireless work, Grubbs said they are constrained to a system that desperately needs change.

"I just thoroughly believe we need a whole new system. It needs to be simplified," Grubbs said. "In some respects, it's amazing that elections come off as well as they do."

In Butte County, the elections process does succeed.

Though it may not be the same in Los Angeles County or other bigger counties, here, a ballot likely gets more attention after it is dropped off than the voter gave it as they cast their choices.

By the end of the day Monday, official election results should be available, with several key races, including the Chico and Oroville City Council races determined by those numbers.

And no matter where the votes fall, Butte County voters can rest assured that their choices were included in the final tally.

"When they say every vote counts," Lee said, pausing to look at a team of workers scanning ballots, "every vote counts."

Staff writer Toni Scott can be reached at 896-7767

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