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BOARD OF ELECTIONS
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It's been an interesting past 12 months or so all the way around, and things have been no different for the Columbia County Board of Elections. Ordinarily a painstaking and oftentimes difficult job in the best of times, a pandemic and the changes that came along with that offered up a new twist.

More than once I've heard people say that the Board of Elections must be a sleepy place. Nothing could be further from the truth, and it performs a critical function in the maintenance of our democracy.

Republican Election Commissioner Kelly Miller-Simmons and Democratic Commissioner Ken Dow had their hands full in 2020. The biggest change, of course, would be the voting-by-mail initiative instituted in the attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

For the 2020 November election, the county Board of Elections processed nearly 10,000 absentee ballot requests, or approximately 20 percent of Columbia County's 48-49,000 eligible voters. Contrast that with most any other presidential election years, in which the BOE might receive up to 3,000 requests.

Preceding the run-up to the presidential election cycle came the primary season, in which New York State directed county boards of election to send postage-paid absentee ballot application to all eligible Republican and Democratic voters. For the general election, voters were required to submit their own requests for a ballot.

Let's take a look at what happens when an absentee ballot application is received. Right off the top, a good deal of work is put in to getting that person their absentee ballot.

When an application is received, it's scanned into the system – if a Republican BOE staff person has performed the scanning, a Democratic staffer needs to check it, and vice versa. Following that, labels are made, printed, the ballot gets printed, the envelope gets stuffed and it's off to the post office.

Sounds simple, but with, at times, 500 or so applications pouring in per day, it's a time-consuming operation. Calculations made by the county commissioners have shown that it takes, from start to finish, three minutes of staff time to complete the aforementioned tasks. A bit of simple math makes it easy to understand how all eight individuals in the BOE office oftentimes needed to stay until 8 or 9 p.m. to finish their days.

Closer to the election, early voting at the BOE got underway, further stretching its manpower. Two lines were kept moving, to the point that a voter was processed every 30 seconds.

On Election Day, it was a matter of running poll sites while simultaneously maintaining COVID-19 protocols. Amidst all this, no poll worker or voter came down with the virus, something that would have come to light through county Department of Health contact tracing efforts.

Columbia County residents are fortunate to have an efficient Board of Elections that works well together. Akin to a baseball umpire, the BOE might be said to be doing its best work while remaining nearly invisible to the public, while going about their very technical and very specific work.