

LONG ISLAND POLITICS

Suffolk elections board reverses, will allow walk-in absentee voting

The commissioners agreed to hire four temporary workers to help handle the increased volume of ballots this year.

By David M. Schwartz

david.schwartz@newsday.com @schwartznewsNY

Updated October 24, 2018 7:56 PM

The Suffolk County Board of Elections reversed course Wednesday and will once again welcome walk-in voters seeking to cast absentee ballots on the spot at its Yaphank headquarters.

The board commissioners agreed to hire four temporary workers, at a cost of about \$9,600, to help handle the increased absentee-ballot volume this year.

Republican Commissioner Nicholas LaLota had ended the longtime practice of allowing walk-in voters to request, receive and cast a ballot at the Yaphank office. LaLota said workers would have to process ballots on a first-come, first-served basis — even if that meant those who showed up in person to request absentee ballots had to return the next day.

LaLota said in a statement the hires “will enable the Board to do both what is required and what is desired.”

Democratic Commissioner Anita Katz, who had opposed changing the policy, said: “I’m glad the situation was resolved. People should have an opportunity to vote in the most convenient way possible.”

After a Newsday story about the policy change, first published online Tuesday, the League of Women Voters of Suffolk County reached out to the election commissioners.

Also, County Executive Steve Bellone wrote a letter to the state Board of Elections on Wednesday, asking it to investigate the Suffolk BOE because the new policy was “disenfranchising voters.”

Later, Bellone welcomed the policy reversal. “We will remain vigilant in identifying and calling out any additional efforts to prevent people in Suffolk County from exercising their right to vote,” he said in a statement.

In response, LaLota accused Bellone of grandstanding and said the county executive hadn't returned his calls earlier in the day, “asking him to partner in my proposed solution.”

Absentee ballots, sent to voters who won't be in the county on Election Day, were mailed out later than normal this year because of a legal challenge to a candidate for county Surrogate's Court.

Also Wednesday, county election officials confirmed that some absentee ballots sent to Smithtown voters in the 1st Congressional District had the wrong congressional candidates.

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley) called for an investigation into the ballots, which listed 3rd District candidates — Democrat Thomas Suozzi and Republican Dan DeBono — instead of Zeldin and his Democratic opponent Perry Gershon.

A Suffolk Board of Elections source confirmed that issue and said the agency is investigating the problem. Another source estimated 25 or fewer incorrect ballots were sent out. Commissioners said they expected an investigation to begin Thursday.

Zeldin's campaign provided three incorrect ballots and characterized the errors as "voter suppression" of Republicans because they occurred in Smithtown, which is heavily Republican.

"I want to know how this happened, who is responsible for this happening, why this happened, and how this will be fixed instantly," Zeldin said.

Gershon's campaign also called for an investigation.

Judi Harris, 67, of Nissequogue, a registered Republican, said she had looked forward to voting for Zeldin, and was surprised to open her absentee ballot and not see his name.

"Everyone has the right to vote for person they think is the best candidate," Harris said. "The absentee ballots are incorrect. I felt the Board of Election betrayed us."