Clerk's Office FY 24 Budget Memo
May 11, 2023

1. **Have there been any noteworthy changes or events that took place during FY23 in your department (staffing changes, technology upgrades, new regulations or procedures, etc.)?**

Staffing Changes: In April, the Elections Administrator position was filled to bring the department to full complement (2 union positions/ 2 nonunion). She is receiving extensive training in preparation for the 2023 Election season.

Upgrades: The City Council graciously funded key equipment purchases such as:
- A much-needed high speed tabulator that will alleviate the burden of poll workers having to manually handle the mountainous volume of vote-by-mail ballots
- Replacement telescoping tables and chairs to accommodate staff and assist them with juggling the many required early voting tasks secure storage bins; and
- A secure mobile poll pad charging cart for easy transport to the polls

Regulation | Procedures: Much time, care and attention has been provided to the elections department this year. When former Governor Baker signed the VOTES Act into law in June of 2022, several key changes to ballot processing to allow registered voters every opportunity to securely cast their vote either early in-person, by-mail, or on election day in-person, were made permanent.

Additional changes included the expansion of early in-person voting times and dates, allowing 10 additional days prior to an election to register to vote, and increased access to voting by mail with the addition of an online state portal for applying to vote by mail and no excuse vote-by-mail (VBM). VBM has been well received and is an increasingly popular method selected by Melrose voters as their comfort level grows. A byproduct of this wider expanse of accessibility is unfunded processing mandates. The former 3-step process may now include up to 13 steps for a vote-by-mail ballot. Ballots are provided in a kitted envelope packet comprised of two envelopes, a ballot, and instructions. For state and federal elections, the Secretary of the Commonwealth provides postage paid kits. For all local elections the municipality bears the entire cost. In 2024 it is anticipated there will be two fall local elections and the spring federal presidential primary. Additional elections are not known currently.

Election Noteworthy:
- Staff attended ongoing virtual classes held by the state's Election Division personnel to ensure regulations were reviewed and discussed.
- After establishing and trialing our own dual control chain of custody procedure for drop box ballot retrieval, this was formalized and is now a mandatory security protocol for all elections.
- Secure tracking was established for election day where officers transport uncast ballots and a chain of custody form directly to election officials for signature and then distribution to precinct wardens. Officers repeat the process at the end of the night returning cast ballots in secured containers back to city hall for safe retention.
- Additional safety measures were instituted where officers, accompanied by an election official, securely transport thousands of VBM cast ballots to precinct wardens throughout the day for voter roll reconciliation and processing.

- Uptick in voter registration information system (VRIS)research and certification entries due to legislated removal of the Registry of Motor Vehicles opt-out provision. Transactions completed at the RMV automatically trigger an entry in VRIS as do transactions at certain health agencies.

A highlight for both departments was a complete revamp of the in-office fire and waterproof vault. These floor to ceiling vaults house thousands of records, some over a century old. The space has never been utilized to its fullest potential and was identified by the clerk in 2023 to pose a safety risk. Working in concert with public safety officials and public works, the clerk space was reconfigured, and additional shelving was added. As a result, the space now has increased lighting, access to a large floor footprint—all of which has increased production time and employee safety. The election vault was emptied, reconfigured to safely and securely house all materials required by law leading up to an election. The shelving was shored up and secure storage was purchased and labeled.

City Clerk Noteworthy:

- Partnered with the HHS Director to educate and notify dog owners no longer living in Melrose or owners with multiple erroneous accounts to clean the database and provide an accurate picture of dogs. Licensed over 2,000 dogs to date.
- Continued collaboration with the Treasurer/Collectors office to capture outstanding debt and reduce the City's overall collection debt prior to issuing licenses and business certificates. A recent $100,000 payment significantly contributed to this reduction.
- Recent state changes to the hackney(taxi) license for new applicants were received and integrated. Staff are keeping abreast of the Registry of Vital Records complete software upgrade anticipated in June.

Our overarching goal is to continue providing superior service to internal and external customers, state agencies, elected and appointed officials; and to streamline online processes and contribute to positive interactions with our customers and residents.

2. **Do all of your department's salaries come from the same budget, if not, please identify the split among multiple budgets?**
   City Clerk and Election staff salary and wages all come from the same budget.

3. **Are there any significant changes to your FY24 budget compared to last year? Please explain.**
   The election department budget has been substantially increased for FY24. The salary and wages line was increased to provide for part-time temporary staff to supplement this single person office. The elections administrator position is eligible for overtime however election processing cannot be handled by a single individual. The most impactful budget factor in recent years has been anticipating and forecasting the volume and cost of regulated processes and procedures. As forecasting is not exact, historical information – salary, overtime, expenses – of previous elections was relied upon to build out this budget. We used election expenses incurred in FY21 (7/1/20-6/30/21) as a foundational building block for this knowing that was the most recent presidential election with VBM. There are local elections to factor in as well (municipality bears all costs) to factor in. Check out inspectors will return at each precinct for the primary to ensure accurate party selection.

4. Any events or changes you anticipate in your department for FY24?

We learned processes for incarcerated individuals are impacted by the Votes Act and changes will funnel through the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Elections Division to municipalities. Additionally, the much-anticipated redesign/upgrade of the state voter registration information system (VRIS) and requisite training is scheduled to roll out in FY24. Public records requests will likely double during election 'season' and we will continue our timely responsiveness. Participation in webinar trainings offered by our federal partner, Cybersecurity, and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) will continue and trainings for internal staff on de-escalation techniques, security best practices and wellness of the poll worker will be scheduled.   We anticipate our Board of Registrars' participation in registration drives at the Victorian Fair and Melrose High School as part of our citizen engagement efforts – "to a lifetime of voting."

Similarly, on the clerk side, we are scheduled to hear from officials at the State Registry of Vital Records on the statewide system upgrade and mandatory training. We will continue our records management and preservation efforts reviewing the state municipal records retention schedule to purge duplicates and information beyond retention periods to preserve historical archives as purely as possible. Our ongoing efforts to manually digitize records will also continue.