

Voting machines undergoing examinations ahead of election

- BY BRADY PETREE
- Oct 22, 2024

With exactly two weeks left until the Nov. 5 general election, Mobile County Probate Judge Don Davis and his staff are working diligently to ensure each of the approximately 200-plus voting machines are up to par ahead of the big day.

Prior to sending the machines out to nearly 80 polling locations across Mobile County, Davis and a handful of courthouse workers spent all day Tuesday at a voting machine warehouse on Schillinger Road, testing the machines to prove they are working as expected. This includes submitting and testing multiple types of ballots like absentee and provisional, along with incorrectly filled out ballots among others.

Each machine is specifically programmed for a particular location, meaning ballots illegally smuggled from one location to another won't be recognized and the machines will alert poll workers of the situation.

While testing of the machines is mandated by state law, Davis said he takes the issue seriously and opts to keep the practice in-house, compared to smaller, rural counties that are often forced to contract out their testing due to a lack of manpower.

"I don't have the voting machine company that manufactures the machines and tests the ballots do the testing," Davis said. "We do our own testing because I want to be able to say, without any hesitation, that they work here and everything was done correctly."

Dating back to the 2016 election, Davis said skepticism over the machines' credibility has grown nationwide. By informing the public about how Mobile County operates,

Davis said he hopes to quell any concerns voters may have about the machines they're casting their ballots into.

Since precincts across the state of Alabama use the same type of machines used in Mobile County, Davis said voters statewide should put their concerns over the integrity of any Election Day machinery to rest.

"Since 2016, there have been things across the country that have caused me some concern," Davis said. "But our message to our citizens is that our machines have integrity and they are very secure, we test them and they have passed those tests. We have no indications of irregularity at the polls when they have been utilized."

On Election Day, Davis said Mobile County will have around 1,100 poll workers in the field manning polling stations. Leading up to Nov. 5, Davis said he believes county poll workers have undergone the most arduous training regimen throughout the state.

Workers are required to complete a two-hour online training program, along with vigorous hands-on training. This includes a 45-minute segment led by Davis to show how the basic machines work, along with a 30-minute training session on other types of machines that can be used on Election Day.

"Our training is the model for other counties, from what we're told," Davis said. "Our training is very thorough. ... Workers spend about five or six hours in total training to be a poll worker."

Davis said the hands-on portion of training began last week and is scheduled to be completed this week at three separate locations across the county including the Schillinger Road warehouse, Bishop State Community College and one in Saraland.

When Davis was elected in 2000, Election Day training consisted of poll workers being mailed a pamphlet with all of the necessary information. Upon taking office in 2001, Davis said, he made it his mission to overhaul the way training is done in Mobile County.

“I didn’t like the way it was done at all,” Davis said. “As soon as I realized that was our approach, I changed all of that. And then we started doing more training. We have a poll worker guide, I lead the training and we’ve done a lot of things through the years here to make sure our poll workers know what they’re doing and to ensure the integrity of the operation.”

Slated to retire in January, Davis said the final two weeks leading up to the election are “incredibly hectic” as he prepares for his final time overseeing a successful Election Day countywide.

“I’m leaving here and headed to do a mental health docket that will take me several hours to do and I even have a temporary judge helping me,” Davis said. “There’s a lot going on, but it’s all good stuff and we’re on top of it.”

Brady Petree is a reporter with Lagniappe.