



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS



ACTON AREA

Serving Acton, Boxborough, Littleton, Maynard and Stow, Massachusetts

Results of Observing the Election on November 7, 2006

In response to widespread concern expressed by voters of Acton regarding the decision of the Board of Selectmen to centralize all six polling precincts into a single location in the Blanchard Auditorium of the RJ Grey Junior High School for the November 7th mid-term election, the League of Women Voters – Acton Area (LWV-AA) monitored the ease with which citizens were able to vote. The Board of Selectmen was informed.

This report contains the following information:

Methodology of Data Collection

General Observations

Observations inside the Polling Place

Observations outside the Polling Place

Recommendations

Tables and Charts of the Data

Appendix of Voter Comments

Methodology

- Observation of the election was conducted from 7:00 AM until the polls closed shortly after 8:00 PM on Tuesday, November 7, 2006.
- Data collection was done by members of LWV – AA, working in two-hour shifts throughout the day, and using forms designed for the purpose. This activity was coordinated by Jo-Ann Berry, Marilyn Peterson, and Suzanne Shanahan, all three of whom were at the polling station all day.
- Observers, wearing buttons identifying them as “Observers from LWV,” were located inside the polling place and outside in the parking areas. Data were recorded every 30 minutes starting at 7:00 AM.
- Data collected inside included the number of voters waiting in line to check in and to check out at each precinct at the time of recording. If there was a line, the time it took for the last person in line to receive a ballot or submit a ballot was recorded. The number of votes on each precinct’s machine was recorded on the hour.

- ❑ Data collected outside included a snapshot count of the number of available parking spots in the following designated locations for parking:
 - west side parking lot,
 - field in front of Blanchard Auditorium,
 - circle area at front entrance,
 - small lot at the back of the building near the entrance to Leary Field, and
 - east side parking lot.

For analysis purposes, these data were converted to the number of spaces occupied at the recorded time. Our data do not account for voters who parked in other lots, such as K-Mart, Merriam, and Parker Damon.

- ❑ Observers had postcards addressed to the LWV – AA available for voters who wanted to make comments on their experience. The cards were distributed only to those who requested them or who approached observers with comments or complaints. Some cards were returned to observers on the spot, others were mailed later, and LWV – AA received some via e-mail. These comments can be found in the Appendix.
- ❑ Data were collated onto Excel spreadsheets. Charts and graphs were extracted from the data. Data on number of voters and percent of voters by precinct for the elections of November 2002, November 2004, and November 2006 were obtained from the Town Clerk. The election of 2002 was a similar election with contests for governor and state legislators. The 2004 election was a presidential election

General Observations

1. Voter turnout in Precincts 1, 2 and 6, those precincts that were relocated to Blanchard, was markedly lower compared to previous turnouts. This is of particular concern to LWV – AA. See Table 1.
2. Voters who looked at the Town of Acton website for information on where to vote were given incorrect information. The Massachusetts Elections Division website, where the “find your precinct” link on the Town of Acton website currently directs inquiries, lists the old precinct locations.
3. There was a dramatic increase in the number of absentee ballots cast in Precincts 1, 2 and 6 in 2006 over the number cast in 2002. The greater the geographic distance from Blanchard, the higher the percentage of absentee ballots cast. See Table 2.
4. The morning totals include absentee ballots that were submitted to the machines for recording by poll workers when they had time between voters. Thus, the voter counts for the morning hours may not accurately reflect the number of voters at the polling place. The spikes in the graph accompanying Table 3 may be due to the processing of absentee ballots.

5. The flow of voters was fairly even throughout the day with a steady increase from after 3:00 PM until 7:00 PM. The least busy time was 3:00 PM – 4:00 PM. See Tables 3, 4, and 5.
6. There was a high level of frustration expressed by voters who had difficulty in accessing the Junior High polling place due to traffic density. The root of the problem appears to be the sheer volume of voters attempting to maneuver through a constantly busy area of town.
7. Voters expressed dissatisfaction with the difficulty they experienced in finding a parking space, even though our counts of parking spots indicate that there were empty spaces available throughout the day. See Table 6.

Observations inside the Polling Place

The voting process itself went smoothly and voters' experiences in voting were positive.

1. At no time was there a wait in line of more than four minutes, at either check in or check out, for the voters in all six precincts.
2. Town Clerk, Eva Taylor, and her staff of election workers performed efficiently. Voters' needs were met in a professional and friendly manner throughout the day. When there were questions on validity of voter registration or other issues, they were resolved quickly and satisfactorily. The doors were opened early to accommodate voters in line. 170 people voted before 7:00 AM.
3. The ability of the Town Clerk to supervise the election in one location was undoubtedly a benefit to her and the process overall. Any problems with machinery or with questions of any kind were easily dispatched by having her present at all precincts throughout the day.
4. The League postcards brought an unanticipated benefit in redirecting voters' comments and complaints away from the poll workers. Any irate voters were asked to see the LWV observer for a postcard; most did and were satisfied to move on after returning it with comments or taking it to complete later.
5. The buzz of democracy was palpable inside the polling place. Just as athletic events generate energy among participants and spectators, the mass of voters coming to participate in the most basic democratic process was exciting.
6. Teachers from both the junior and senior high schools brought groups of students to observe the process. Two political science classes conducted exit polling. One teacher brought his whole class to watch him go through the voting process. All these and others were coordinated with the Town Clerk and were welcomed into the polling place.

Observations outside the Polling Place

1. Traffic surrounding the school campus proved to be the biggest challenge for voters attempting to reach the junior high school to vote. Depending on the time of day, backups were reported as far as West Acton to the west and onto Route 2 on Route 111 to the east; as far north as Town Hall on Route 27 and as far south as Exchange Hall. Prospect Street was backed up several times during the day and proved almost impossible to exit.
2. Once on campus, parking was available throughout the day, but empty spaces were not necessarily obvious to drivers, especially in the west parking lot that has a single entrance/exit. Back ups onto Route 111 were caused when incoming cars waited for cars to back out just inside the entrance to the parking lot instead of proceeding further into the lot where there were available spaces.
3. The handicapped and elderly had difficulty accessing the building easily and were not sure what entrances to use. They were not aware that they could park along the curve along the front circle. Many took the long walk up from the lower parking lot.
4. The lighting on the campus was not optimal, and after dark, people not familiar with the area had difficulty navigating while driving and while walking. The temporary lights on the field were blinding from many angles.

Recommendations

The League of Women Voters – Acton Area is concerned that traffic and parking problems experienced by voters in this election might deter voters in future elections.

1. The Board of Selectmen should reconsider their decision to centralize the six precincts into a single location at the Junior High. They should convene a committee consisting of stakeholders, including representatives of the Acton and Acton-Boxborough Schools, Acton Police, Town Clerk, voters from each precinct, the Council on Aging, the Commission on Disability, and the League of Women Voters to evaluate voters' comments and complaints on the locations of polling places. The charge to the committee should be to recommend polling location(s) that best serve the voters.
2. The election of 2008 will likely have a higher turnout than the 2006 election (2004 was higher than either 2002 or 2006). **If** the decision is made to remain at one polling place, the Board of Selectmen needs to address the following concerns:

Inside the polling place

- a. Adjusting check-in stations and wardens' areas to allow lines to form and for voters to see beyond Precinct 1 as they enter the area;

- b. Having one or more “greeters” near the entrance to the polling area to assist voters in determining their precincts, locating the correct check-in area, and getting to the check-out area, as needed.

Website

The “find your precinct” link on the Town website should be linked to a local webpage so that voters are able to get accurate information on the polling location.

Outside the polling place

- a. Recognize the limitation of the use of the field for parking if weather is inclement.
- b. Improved signage is needed.
 - 1) Handicapped and elderly voters need better signs directing them to parking and handicapped entrances.
 - 2) Provide clearer signs directing voters to all available parking.
 - 3) Provide clear signage directing voters to the correct doors.
- c. Improve traffic flow.
 - 1) Utilize police or others to manage traffic on roads and on campus.
 - 2) Reconsider the optimal traffic flow and direction on campus, especially in the morning before the Junior High classes begin and in the afternoon when buses are waiting for pick up, as well as during the drop off/starting time for the Parker Damon Building.
 - 3) Improve traffic management at the west parking lot with two people, one inside the lot pointing to available spaces and the other at the entrance to the lot directing people into the lot or to the parking lots on the east side.

Whether the change to a single voting location is made permanent, voting is returned to the former locations, or one or more new locations are used, make the decision process very public. Once the decision is made, educate the voters on the lessons learned regarding the issues outlined above as well as from other sources.

Respectfully submitted,

Jo-Ann Berry, Marilyn Peterson, Suzanne Shanahan
For the League of Women Voters – Acton Area

Tables and Charts

Table 1

Voter turnout (%) by precinct

Year	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Average
2002	70.90	74.84	76.53	74.62	73.65	74.92	74%
2004	82.48	85.75	88.57	87.06	85.29	84.04	86%
2006	65.14	68.20	73.24	74.00	72.29	69.49	70%

**Voter turnout average by precincts changing location
and precincts in same location**

Year	Changed (1,2,6)	Same (3,4,5)	Difference
2002	73.55%	74.93%	1.38% (1,2,6 lower)
2004	84.09%	86.97%	2.88% (1,2,6 lower)
2006	67.61%	73.12%	5.51% (1,2,6 lower)

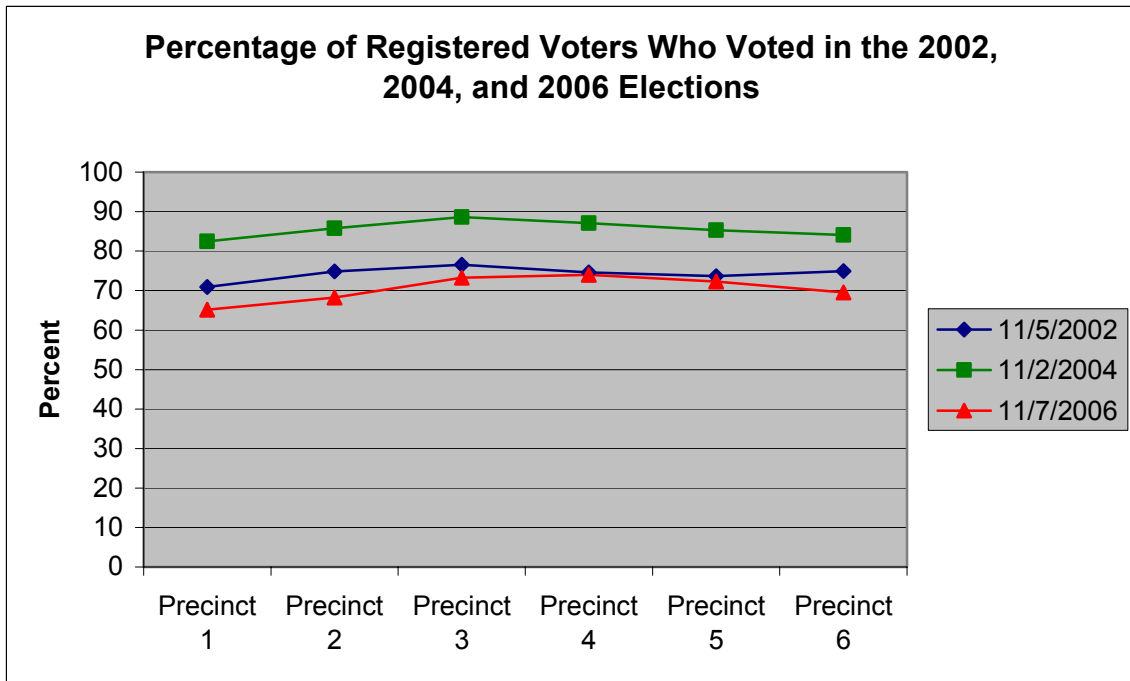


Table 2

Absentee Ballot Numbers for 2002, 2004, and 2006 Elections

2002	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Total
Total Number of Votes	1272	1490	1748	1517	1495	1427	8949
Number of Absentee Ballots	71	55	79	87	71	77	440
Percent of Absentee Ballots	5.58%	3.69%	4.54%	5.74%	4.75%	5.40%	4.92%
2004	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Total
Total Number of Votes	1662	1818	2077	1789	1745	1685	10776
Number of Absentee Ballots	156	168	173	133	165	162	957
Percent of Absentee Ballots	9.39%	9.24%	8.33%	7.43%	9.46%	9.61%	8.88%
2006	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Total
Total Number of Votes	1265	1437	1694	1500	1466	1344	8706
Number of Absentee Ballots	123	121	100	101	115	131	691
Percent of Absentee Ballots	9.72%	8.42%	5.90%	6.73%	7.84%	9.75%	7.94%

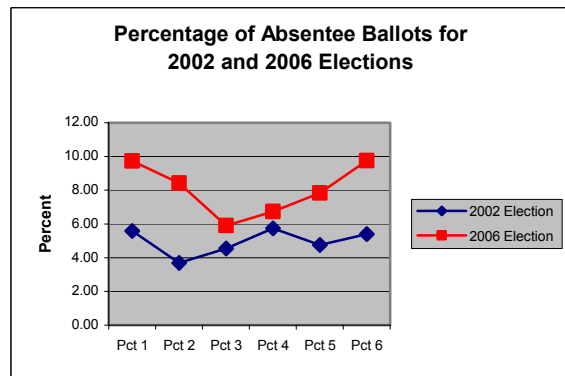
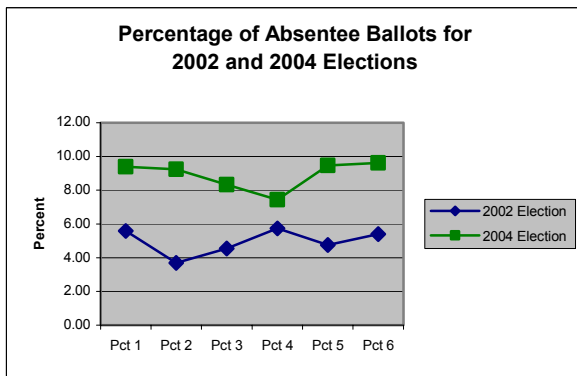
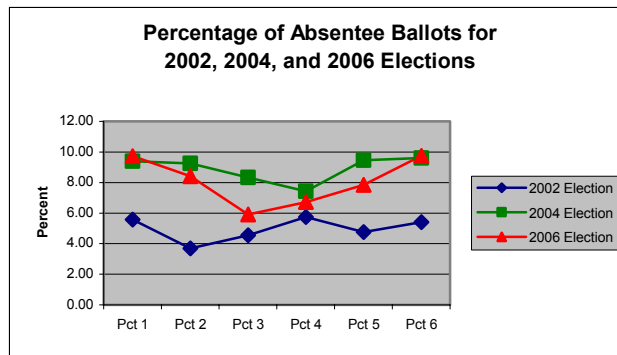


Table 3

Number of Votes per Hour by Precinct

	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Totals
7:00 AM	40	23	35	29	25	18	170
8:00 AM	77	80	99	172	89	89	606
9:00 AM	122	92	214	93	134	96	751
10:00 AM	113	119	123	127	130	197	809
11:00 AM	100	97	147	116	95	133	688
Noon	63	106 *	120	99	89	69	546
1:00 PM	64	107 *	93	62	79	71	476
2:00 PM	57	107 *	111	69	137	89	570
3:00 PM	44	53	58	80	53	36	324
4:00 PM	97	99	95	99	102	93	585
5:00 PM	96	120	145	119	159	101	740
6:00 PM	120	125	175	139	109	106	774
7:00 PM	137	162	148	166	139	128	880
8:00 PM	134	147	131	130	127	117	786

*To smooth out anomaly of no counts at Noon and 1:00 PM, the number of votes for these three hours is averaged.

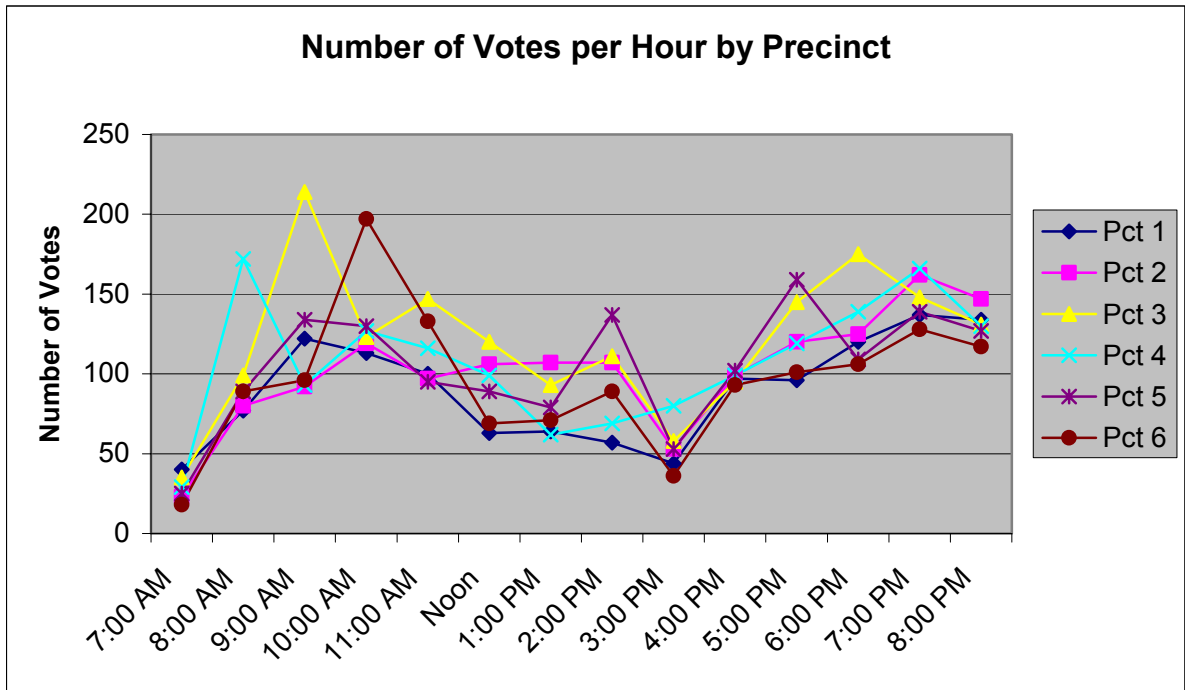


Table 4

Vote Total by Precinct							Cumulative
	Precinct 1	Precinct 2	Precinct 3	Precinct 4	Precinct 5	Precinct 6	Totals
7:00 AM	40	23	35	29	25	18	170
8:00 AM	117	103	134	201	114	107	776
9:00 AM	239	195	348	294	248	203	1527
10:00 AM	352	314	471	421	378	400	2336
11:00 AM	452	411	618	537	473	533	3024
12:00 PM	515	414 *	738	636	562 *	602	3467
1:00 PM	579	414 *	831	698	641	673	3836
2:00 PM	636	731	942	767	778	762	4616
3:00 PM	680	784	1000	847	831	798	4940
4:00 PM	777	883	1095	946	933	891	5525
5:00 PM	873	1003	1240	1065	1092	992	6265
6:00 PM	993	1128	1415	1204	1201	1098	7039
7:00 PM	1130	1290	1563	1370	1340	1225	7918
8:00 PM	1264	1437	1694	1500	1467	1343	8705
Precinct Totals	1264	1437	1694	1500	1467	1343	8705

*Machine jammed

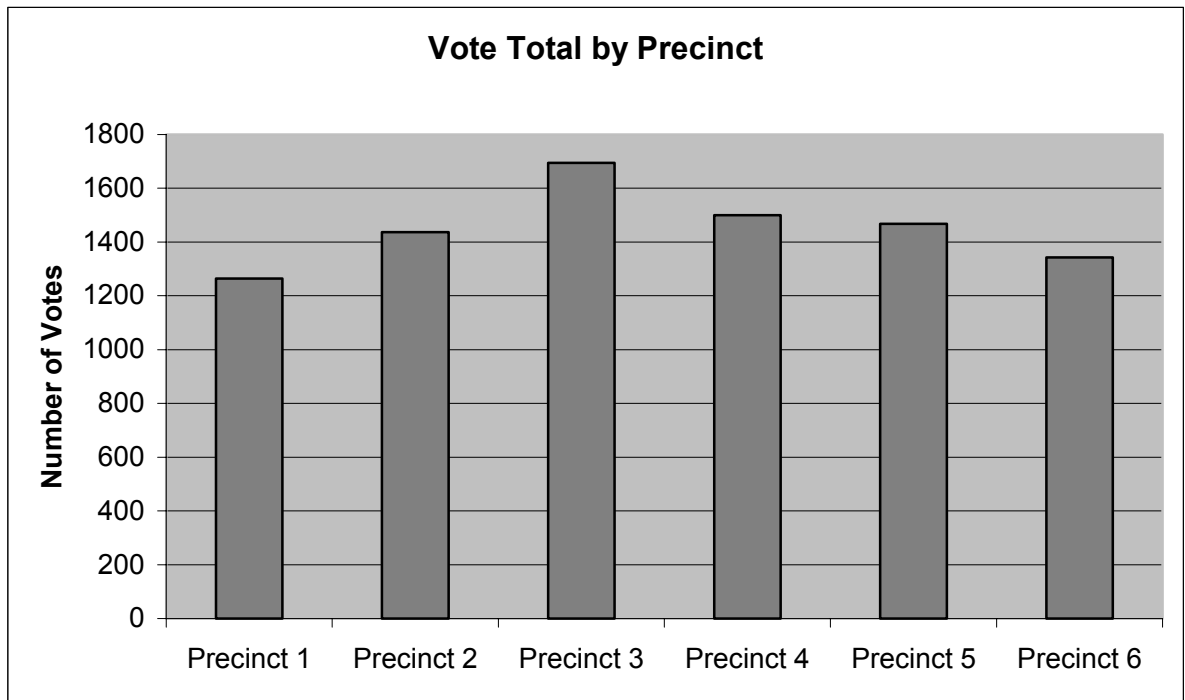


Table 5

Number of Votes per Hour by Precinct

	Pct 1	Pct 2	Pct 3	Pct 4	Pct 5	Pct 6	Totals
7:00 AM	40	23	35	29	25	18	170
8:00 AM	77	80	99	172	89	89	606
9:00 AM	122	92	214	93	134	96	751
10:00 AM	113	119	123	127	130	197	809
11:00 AM	100	97	147	116	95	133	688
Noon	63	106 *	120	99	89	69	546
1:00 PM	64	107 *	93	62	79	71	476
2:00 PM	57	107 *	111	69	137	89	570
3:00 PM	44	53	58	80	53	36	324
4:00 PM	97	99	95	99	102	93	585
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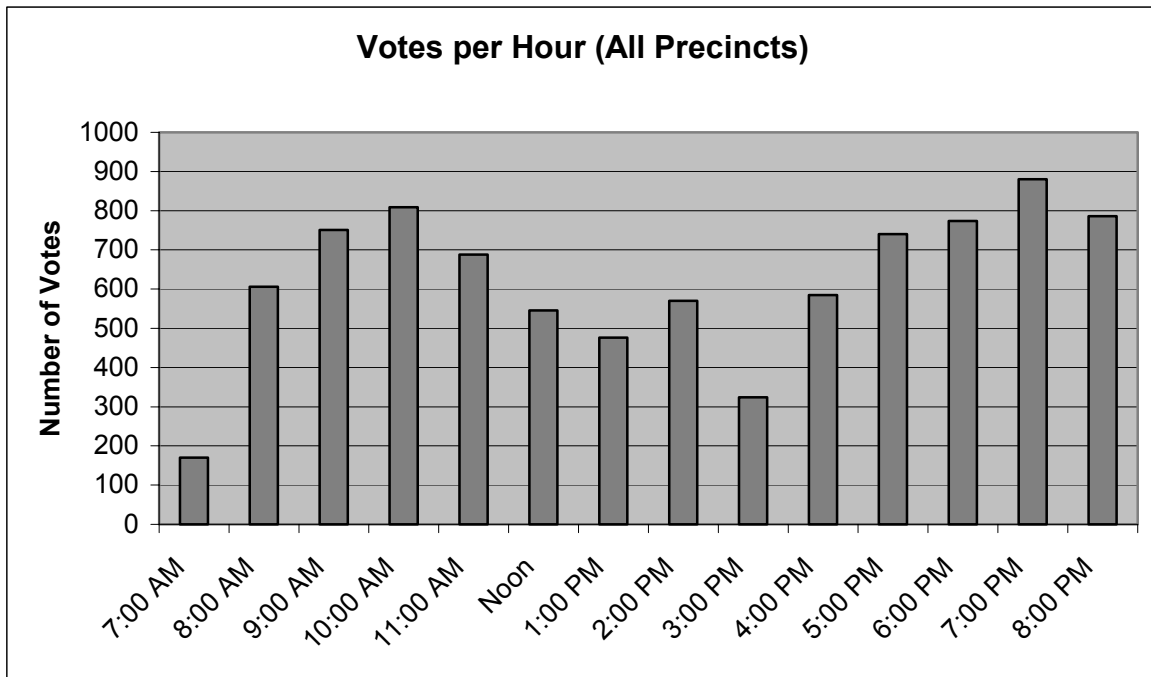
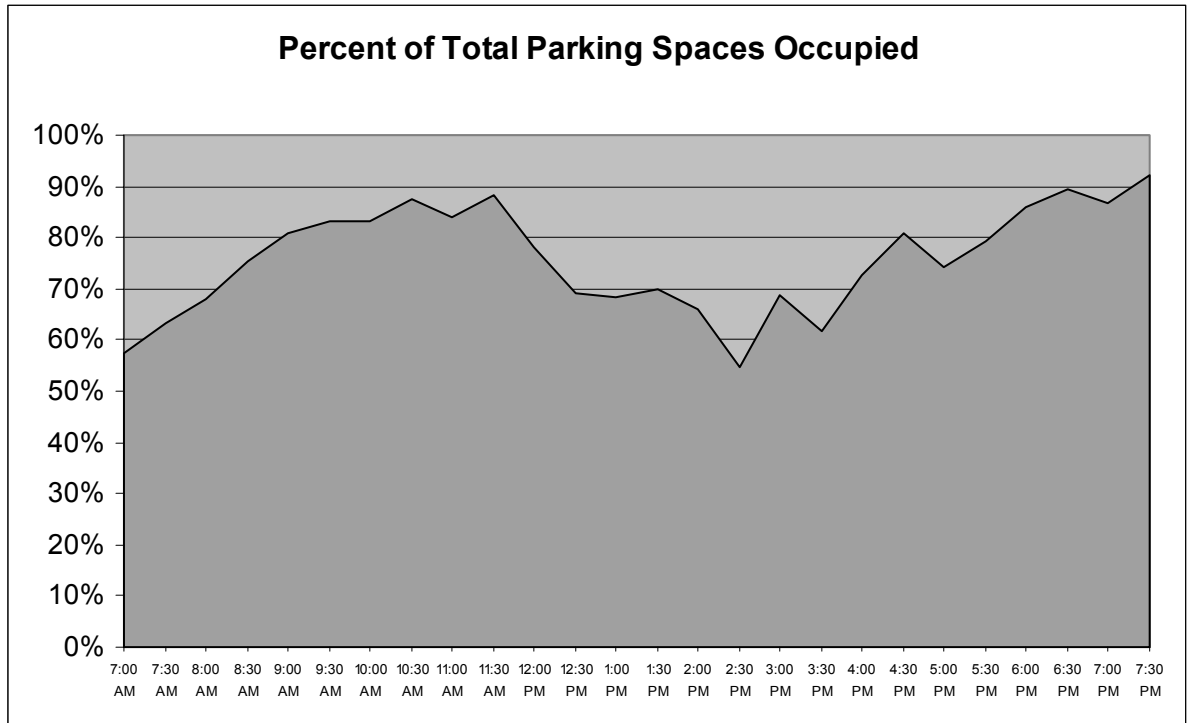


Table 6

Snapshot Count of Number of Cars Parked

Time	Number of Cars (112 Spaces Available)				Number of Cars (134 Spaces Available)					Total Parked Cars	Percent Occupied
	West Side	West HP	West Total	Field	East Side	Back Lot	East Total	Front Circle	Circle HP		
7:00 AM	60	0	60	31	40	5	45	4	1	141	57%
7:30 AM	64	0	64	27	54	5	59	4	2	156	63%
8:00 AM	66	1	67	26	51	5	56	4	2	167	68%
8:30 AM	65	0	65	33	78	6	84	1	2	185	75%
9:00 AM	73	2	75	28	88	3	91	3	2	199	81%
9:30 AM	64	0	64	29	86	4	90	1	2	205	83%
10:00 AM	64	0	71	33	96	4	100	0	1	205	83%
10:30 AM	71	0	71	28	96	6	102	8	2	215	87%
11:00 AM	61	0	61	32	98	8	106	8		207	84%
11:30 AM	70	1	71	32	99	8	107	7		217	88%
12:00 PM	52	1	53	29	96	6	102	4	4	192	78%
12:30 PM	42	1	43	30	85	7	92	3	2	170	69%
1:00 PM	50	1	51	24	74	9	83	10		168	68%
1:30 PM	50	1	51	30	75	7	82	9		172	70%
2:00 PM	41	2	43	22	81	9	90	7		162	66%
2:30 PM	39	1	40	18	60	7	67	10		135	55%
3:00 PM	34	2	36	32	79	7	86	15		169	69%
3:30 PM	34	1	35	21	77	6	83	13		152	62%
4:00 PM	51	1	52	30	84	5	89	8		179	73%
4:30 PM	67	2	69	30	83	9	92	8		199	81%
5:00 PM	61	2	63	20	84	8	92	4	4	183	74%
5:30 PM	65	3	68	20	90	9	99	4	4	195	79%
6:00 PM	74	2	76	23	94	10	104	5	3	211	86%
6:30 PM	70	0	70	27	101	16	117	4	2	220	89%
7:00 PM	63	1	64	27	103	14	117	4	1	213	87%
7:30 PM	74	0	74	33	101	15	116	3	1	227	92%
8:00 PM											



Appendix – Comments

League Observer Comments

Parking (East Side, Back lot and Front Circle)

- Heavy traffic from 7:15 – 7:30. Traffic congestion gone at 7:30 – school in session.
- 8:30 AM Complaint about no signage directing voters.
- Signs to parking could be elevated better.
- Co-mingling traffic with student drop-off a major problem from 7:00 – 7:30
- 9:00 AM Signage could make it clear that entry is through Blanchard, especially for people in East Side lot.
- 11:00 AM Sign on the front door at the circle: All Voters Please Use the Blanchard Auditorium Entrance. Thank You.
- 2:00 PM Buses blocked exit for short time – pick-up blocked lower lot for a short time.
- 3:00 – 4:30 PM Unsure where to walk, especially as it gets darker.
- 5:00 PM No street light at handicap entrance on east side – bright field light shining in eyes.
- 6:00 PM Some traffic backup getting in and out of complex.
- 7:00 PM Some are parking across street in Merriam lot. Logjam in parking lot (East side) as people back out and go in both directions.
- A number of cars badly parked, taking two slots.

Parking (West Side and Field)

- 7:00 AM Spots available at far end of west lot. Excessive traffic through Kelly's Corner.
- 9:00 AM West Side – eight in line to come in.
- 9:00 AM Route 111 way up past school.
- 11:00 AM Three cars parked along drive exiting West lot – presumably couldn't find spot in lot.
- 2:00 PM Buses blocking driveway and most of field from 2:00 – 2:15.
- 5:00 PM Line of cars waiting to get to West Side.
- 5:30 PM Light in field blinding when you are facing it.
- 6:00 PM Parking beyond slots on West side – parking on grass.
- 6:30 PM Five cars lined up – hard to see empty slots beyond.

League Observer Comments (cont'd)

Inside Blanchard

7:00 – 9:00 AM Two voters from Boxborough stopped in – “will go back to the church to vote.”

7:00 – 9:00 AM One poll worker for Precinct 1 commented that he preferred Nagog Woods Clubhouse polling site. The voters and poll workers knew each other and it was a friendly event.

Complaint from voter from Nagog Woods: Town website not updated with voting site. Eva’s response: Town is OK, probably state site, which “can’t be updated because this is not a permanent decision.”

9:15 AM Comment from voter: Traffic down 111 toward West Acton and Rt. 27 backed up to Town Hall.

Complaints about parking – one voter said people are/were “very angry.”

Precinct 2 ballot box started misbehaving around 11:00.

1:00 PM Precinct 2 machine not working.

1:30 PM Positive comment: Impressed – smooth, clearly marked. Thought it would be chaos.

3:20 PM Bus from Robbins Brook. Once a line formed for Precinct 1, voters from other precincts just got in line.

3:30PM Unable to exit at 111.

6:30 PM Voter tried at 4:00 – 4:30, left, and returned.

1:00 PM Check-in signs seemed helpful although some confused if never voted here.

4:30 PM Franklin Street not on General Directory.

6:30 PM Confusion on where to stand – beginning vs. end of alphabet – larger signs for check-in.

Lines would move better with tall signs to indicate streets.

Suggestion from voter: League could monitor voters entering to catch candidate stickers.

Postcard Comments from Voters

11:30 AM Voting time was fine – no wait; but the parking was terrible.

10:00 AM Back-up on traffic at Kelly's Corner. Parking was mass confusion. Wife came at 8:00 AM and found the traffic very bad and were confused about which road might be smartest – Kelly's Corner "a total zoo." Husband had better experience by waiting until 10:00 AM.

7:35 AM I truly find our current voting system in Acton satisfying, simple and efficient. My fervent hope is that we NOT change to electronic voting, which has too many real and potential flaws and possibilities for voter fraud. Thank you for monitoring!

12:35 PM Why on earth was polling place moved from Nagog Woods Clubhouse to Jr. High? Ever hear of saving gas??

1:30 PM Man across from me was carrying on a loud conversation on his cell phone. I found it very disturbing and did not finish my ballot because of it. Should post signs for no cell phones.

1:40 PM Although we didn't experience a wait or congestion, it was nevertheless enormously inconvenient coming to R. J. Gray Jr. HS instead of the Nagog Woods clubhouse. We live in Precinct 1. We urge you to reopen the Nagog Woods voting location. I fear long lines at the Jr. HS for the next presidential election.

(No time indicated) My husband is handicapped and couldn't get in – we rode around a number of times.

5:15 PM Voting at one place is absurd. The traffic is a mess – both from commuters in general and trying to get in and out of here.

(No time indicated) Map index #'s on street/precinct list is confusing – think that is precinct.

6:30 PM Please give us back our polling place in Nagog Woods! Traffic & parking was a pain.

5:00 PM Traffic bad. Parking bad. Now I have to figure out how to get out of here. Let's go back to Nagog Clubhouse for Pct. 1.

(No time indicated) The town website for election still has different voting location. I went to Nagog Woods clubhouse this morning and was told the voting booth should be in Jr. High School. Please update the important information. Many people could be misled by the website information.

7:15 AM Traffic was terrible on Rt. 27 trying to get to Jr. High. It seems crazy to have all people vote in 1 place! Why not have multiple polling locations or even better – on-line voting.

9:10 AM Eastbound traffic on Rte. 111 (East) backed up west of Flint Rd. No traffic cop on duty at west entrance to Jr. High School. Parking difficult and inadequate for election volume. ONE polling place is totally inadequate for our town's population. We are no longer a "rural" community and at least one other sight [*sic*] needs to be used. Taxpayer money's paid for our schools and one day's inconvenience is NOT a burden!

9:15 AM Having the luxury of voting during the day vs. after work, the traffic congestion at the above hour on Rte. 111 coming from West Acton was impressive!
Three points:

- Being locked out of a school, we the taxpayers are funding makes one wonder who is in charge??
- Having the town's major routes (111 & 27) in chaos throughout the day and evening – What if a major emergency in Acton, Boxborough & surrounding town occurred – how would emergency vehicles get through – life threatening or not to Emerson or mutual aid???
- How about using fire stations in Acton Ctr/South/West as we have in prior years?? IT'S ONE DAY!

Comments by E-Mail

1. One LWV member & voter's observations: 11/7/2006 @ 7am
As is my custom, I vote on the way to work (I usually get in the office ~7am).

I got to RJ Grey at 6:50. I was able to vote quickly and left. However, the parking spaces were already full as I was leaving at 6:55 and the entrance was backed up to 111!

On my way back down 111 (towards Stow) the traffic on 111 was already backed up *beyond* Deacon Hunt!

IMO, this was a terrible idea to "consolidate" Acton's polling places; it will only serve to depress voter turnout -- something the BOS should not want.

After analyzing all the data from LWV observers today, I hope the LWV comes out in favor of rescinding the decision to consolidate to a single polling place in Acton; doing so will help get more people to participate.

2. Thank you for having a forum for feedback on the voting locale changes this year in Acton.

I voted at 12:15. My primary concern about having everyone at the Junior High is that I think it may be difficult for elders and handicapped folks. I passed an older gentleman who expressed dismay at the amount of walking, as he had parked in the lower lot and had to go up the stairs. I don't think it was clear where it was OK to park. Then outside the gym I passed a woman on crutches who said she couldn't park in a handicapped spot because they were all taken. Fortunately she found a spot on the grass in front of the gym, but she still had quite a walk.

So, I wonder if there could be more handicapped spots, clearly marked, and more signs about where it is OK to park.

One other concern is that bus time for the JR High is the time when working people would go to vote in the a.m. probably making more people having to go after work.

Aside from all that it was wonderful to see so many people voting!!!! I hope it wasn't just because we were all in the same place but because lots and lots of people voted!!!!

Again, thanks for asking for feedback. Check in with elders and see what they thought about parking, walking, etc.