



USGenWeb Election Committee

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Report Number Three of the Election Committee

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Report # 3
July 4, 2001**

The Following Report is submitted to the Advisory Board of the USGenWeb Project:

The Election Committee is pleased to report that the polls for the 2001 USGenWeb Project opened on July 1, 2001 at 7:00 pm (PDT). The 2001 Election is now underway.

After the close of nominations on Jun 18, 2001 the EC began working on the final voter / membership list and the testing of the voting booth software.

Voter/Membership List:

Larry Stephens (U of IN) set up an announcement list for the EC and a test message was sent to the majority of volunteers. Due to a mis-setting on the server the announcement only list was an open list for a short period of time. This resulted in some confusion that was quickly cleared up. The test message resulted in a 159 bounced messages. The EC had already placed the procedure for handing bounced messages in place and the majority of the bad addresses were corrected within 48 hours. Keith Gideon was in charge of this procedure and did an absolutely outstanding job.

Between Jun 18th and Jun 30th several messages were posted on the ALL, DISCUSS, CC-L List and STATE-L lists by the Chair. These messages kept the membership informed about the test message and when members could expect to receive their voter password. In each instance the Chair requested that the message be forwarded to regional and state lists. The cooperation of the SCs and individual volunteers was exceptional and the EC wishes to thank each of these individuals for their help. Without them it would have been impossible to reach the majority of the members.

The e-mail announcement containing the individual's voter password were sent on the morning of July 1, 2001. Many, many of the e-mails bounced. Once again Keith Gideon handled the bounces. The Chair posted a message on the lists mentioned above asking members to contact the EC if they did not receive their password. Once again the help of the SC's and individual members to distribute this message was exceptional.

The ESC's Guidelines directed that the voter/membership list be closed 30 days prior to Jul 1st. This

deadline was set because in the past it was necessary to upload a final list to the voting software server and it could not be changed afterwards. Since this year's master voter list is an actual data base, the EC, after due discussion, reached the decision to keep the voter list open until mid July. Messages were posted on all of the lists mentioned above asking that any volunteer who had not received their password to contact the EC. We are receiving messages daily. These volunteers are being confirmed as to eligibility and then added to the Voter/Membership list as quickly as possible.

Voting Booth Software:

There have been many questions asked of the EC about the Voting Booth Software. For the record the Chair is including this rather lengthy and detailed explanation of the software and the reasons for why things are as they are.

The ECS Guidelines instructed the EC to find a 3rd party voting system. The ESC made this recommendation because of the problems with past elections. It was felt that a 3rd party voting system would satisfy those members who, in the past, felt that the USGenWeb Project's annual elections were not secure, that votes had been tampered with and that vote packing was being allowed (to mention just a few). Two months were spent by the EC looking for such a 3rd party system. Although several were found that fit the guidelines established by the ESC none of them were free, except for VoteBot. The Chair was working with the people at VoteBot when she received a message from one of her contacts stating that VoteBot was withdrawing their free system. The Chair was told that there was no guarantee "that we won't pull the plug in the middle of your election". This, of course, was unacceptable.

The ESC Guidelines also suggested that the EC look into writing a voting program of our own. The EC was already in the process of trying to locate programmers who would be willing to undertake the development of a system. When VoteBot announced they could not guarantee our election would be hosted for the full 30 days the decision was made to develop a voting booth program for use in this year's election.

Michael Anderson, a young man who is the son of one of a past USGenWeb volunteer, agreed to undertake this daunting task. The EC cannot possibly thank Michael enough for the hard work and unbelievable number of hours he spent developing the voting booth software for us. He is an exception young man, not to mention extremely talented.

The first requirement of the voting system was that it had to be one that could be used not only this year but in the future. Therefore, the EC had to try to think of every conceivable situation that might arise and Michael had the task of trying to make the software handle all of these "might happen" circumstances.

The USGenWeb Project structure makes developing a simple voting system impossible.. The EC tested the IA State Voting Software. It is an excellent system but it could not handle the number of variables of a national election.

Because of the regional structure of the Project it is impossible to offer a single ballot that can be used by everyone. After much discussion Michael suggested setting up individual ballots for each item to be voted on. By structuring the voter/membership list in a particular format the voter would be presented with only the ballots for the area/item they are qualified to vote for when they enter the voting booth.

Michael designed the system so that ballots could be set up each year by the EC without any code change requirements. The voting booth software is also designed to handle state, special project and special elections.

The EC and Michael tried to follow the guidelines set up by the ESC. A few of the items were not workable once the development of the software was underway.

The requirements of the software per the ESC's Guidelines are: The voting mechanism selected should meet at least the following criteria:

1. Accept votes (more than one per person, with the ability to drop earlier votes);
2. Display appropriate ballots depending on the ID of the person or have clear directions so a voter can easily find the correct portions of the ballot for which they are eligible to vote;
3. Send a confirmation email once the vote is accepted that includes a date/time stamp, and their votes;
4. Count votes and return reliable results within 24 hours;
5. Compile vote statistics in a way that the EC can post so that people can verify their votes; and
6. Be confidential and secure.

1. Accept votes (more than one per person, with the ability to drop earlier votes) In the past election one of the recurring causes for discontent was the belief that a person's "final" vote was not counted. As the developer of the software Michael felt that the security and integrity of the system would best be served by allowing only one vote. There would be no question as to whether a voter's vote was recorded. The point was made that in real life a person is only allowed to vote once. The USGenWeb Election runs for 30 days which is ample time for a voter to reach a final decision.

3. Send a confirmation email once the vote is accepted that includes a date/time stamp, and their votes; The EC was unable to find a program that would do this without a large outlay of cash (which the Project has none of). Larry Stephen's system does not include this type of program either. Michael designed the ballots so that once a vote is cast the voter's choice is displayed in bold print on the ballot. The voter can print this screen and keep a copy of their vote. Should a person wish to confirm their vote they need only enter the voting booth again and their choices will be displayed. If anyone should question whether or not their vote was actually recorded they may write to Larry Stephens who does have access to the voter's record and he can confirm the recording of the vote.

5. Compile vote statistics in a way that the EC can post so that people can verify their votes Once the development of the software was underway it was found that this item was ambiguous and impossible to fulfil. If the voter's vote is secret and is not available to anyone except the voter themselves then there was no way to post voter results so that an individual could verify their own vote. The way a voter can verify their vote is covered in item #3 above.

6. Be confidential and secure.

This item was the prime objective of the EC and Michael. From the first day of development this directive was foremost in everyone's minds. The software is structured in such a way that only one human has access to the information on how any member voted. And, no matter how much we would all like to eliminate that one human there does have to be someone with access to all information to be sure the software is working properly, to confirm voting information and to monitor the voting process for any bugs or glitches that might arise.

The search for such a human was an extremely difficult task. The person had to be willing to host the voting software at no charge; had to be willing to spend the time necessary to get the software working and to monitor the election for a month; have no connection with the USGenWeb Project or a project volunteer and be above reproach. The only person found who fit all the requirements was Larry Stephens at the U of IN. The EC cannot thank Larry Stephens enough for taking on this task for us.

The EC tested the voting software and made small suggestions for changes and also caught a few

bugs. As of Jul 1st when the polls opened the software was fully operational. To date the biggest problem reported by voters is the error message received if the voter does not set their browser to accept cookies before they try to vote.

The Cookies that are set by the voting program contain the information on which ballot the individual entering the voting booth should see. They do not contain any information on how the individual voted and they expire the same day they are set.

Information about the requirement for Cookies is explained just above the link to the voting booth.

To develop a software program as sophisticated as this one required the use of a powerful PC language. The language chosen required the use of Java. The majority of the volunteers of the Project use either Internet Explorer or Netscape as their browser and these two programs support Java forms.

The EC knew that there were some members who have browsers that do not support Java or have only text based browsers. For those members a "paper ballot" was offered. As of Jul 1, 2001 - 7:00 pm (PDT) when the polls opened the type of "paper ballot" had not been established and the suggested ways a voter could vote using a "paper ballot" had not been tested. The major concern of everyone involved was the final testing of the actual voting software itself so that it would be ready when the polls opened. It was also felt that the majority of people would postpone voting until they had the opportunity to view the Candidates web pages and arrive at a decision. However, before the EC had the opportunity to test the suggested "paper ballots" a Grievance was filed against the EC by David Morgan. Mr. Morgan's Grievance states:

I have been able to vote in every election since 1998, the same way everybody else has been able to vote. This year, the election committee has decided to use software that will not work with a text-based web browser. So I can not vote in the same manner that everyone else can vote. I believe this is discriminatory. I hope you will think about it, even though I don't expect anything to be done

Mr. Morgan is correct in his statement that the EC has decided to use software that will not work with a text-based web browser. The reasons for this are stated above. However, the EC had and has no intention of discriminating against anyone. There will be an alternate means of voting for those who cannot use the regular voting software. The alternate method will allow a member to vote for the candidate of their choice and their vote will be recorded just as surely as if they voted using the voting booth software. This alternate method will be decided on, tested, and a link will be placed on the Voter Instruction Pages as soon as possible.

Other Items:

There is a Voter Instruction Page on the EC web site that not only covers the instructions for voting but also addresses several voting issues. This page is being updated continuously to better serve the voter.

A Question and Answer page is in place on the EC's web site. It is also being updated as new questions are received from members.

The EC will now begin work on a survey form to be placed on the EC's web site. Several items will be listed and it is hoped that through the use of this survey the EC will be able to better serve the membership.

Thank you for your attention to this lengthy report. Should you have any questions the EC will do our best to answer them.

Respectfully submitted by:
Linda Haas Davenport
Chair
USGenWeb Project Election Committee

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