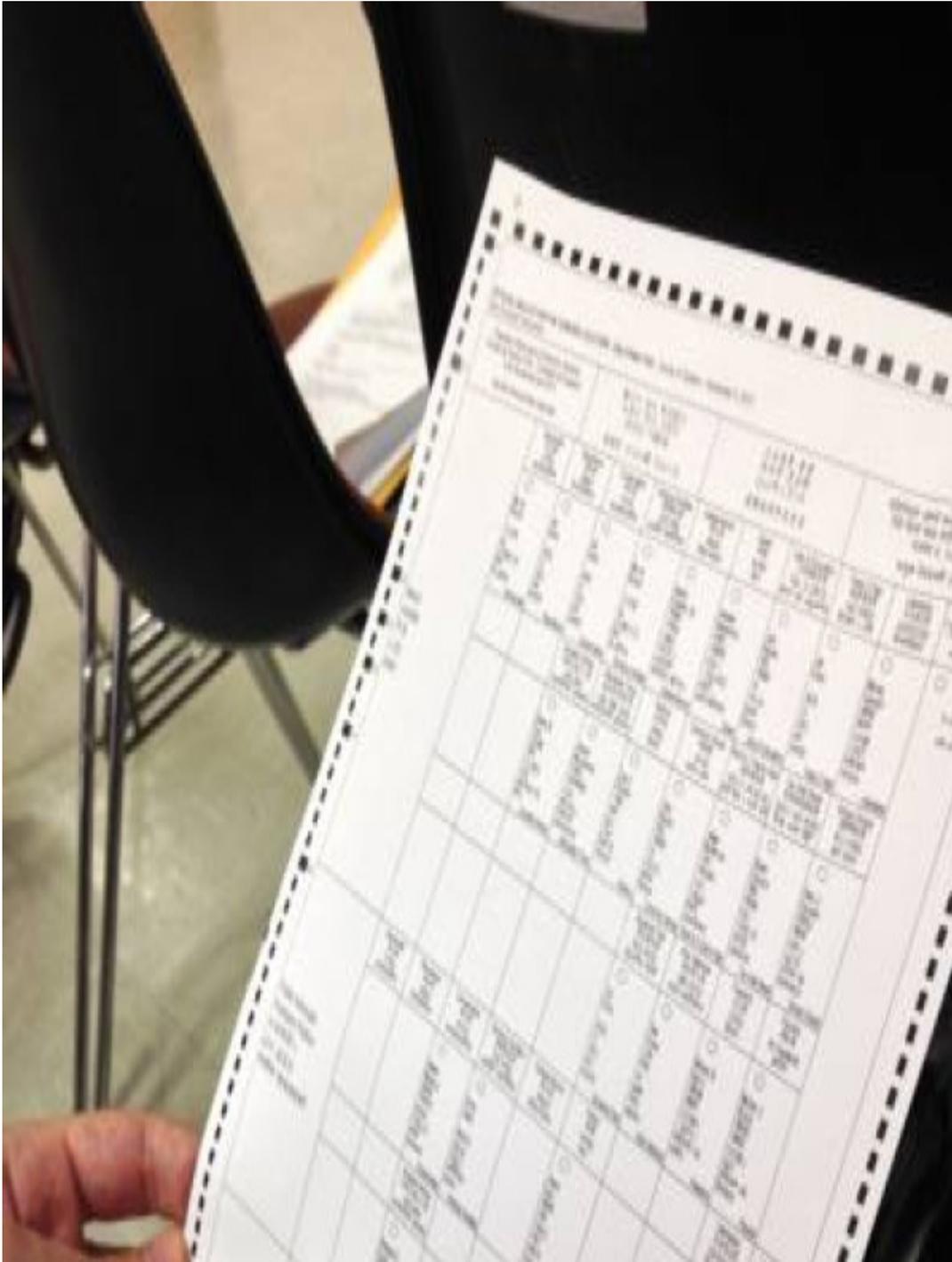


Elections Board Debates Fine Print On Ballots

by Chester Soria

Friday, October 11, 2013 10:20 AM



New Yorkers wanting to vote in November's general election might need to ask poll workers for magnifying glasses.

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The city's Board of Elections is mulling over whether or not it would be violating voter rights if it offered some districts ballots with larger type than others. The choice? Between 8 and 6 point fonts.

As a comparison, the typical size for readable text is 12 points. Some experts consider a size 9 or smaller font illegible. The smallest provided font size in a standard drop-down menu on a typical word processor is 8 points.

The discussion over font sizes on the ballot was a highlight of Tuesday's meeting of the board's commissioners. The hour-long discussion revolved around the minutia of font and paper size.

"It's a complete blur," said Staten Island Democratic Commissioner Maria Guastella at one point, referring to the type on an example ballot. She humbly bragged that even her good eyesight wouldn't enable her to read ballot drafts. "If I see this, I'm not voting."

One regular attendee of the board hearings kept asking staff for a micrometer.

The board's ballot coordinator, Thomas Sattie, told the commissioners that the BOE had to build the ballots as soon as Oct. 2 to comply with election law deadlines. But the board needs the city's legal consent.

If city attorneys give the go-ahead, the board will be able to offer voters in those areas with fewer language requirements more legible type, upgrading to 8-point font from the current 6-point font. The additional language and large number of seats in play is unprecedented for the optical scanning system that the board adopted in 2010, board spokeswoman Valerie Vasquez said.

Building the ballots is no easy task. The board relies on custom software provided by Election Systems & Software, the Nebraska-based company that designed the optical scanning system adopted by the city in 2010.

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Further complicating the process: Each ballot is built a different way. Not only are there different races in each district, but different election districts have different language requirements. This year is the first that Bengali is being included on the ballots.

The ballots passed around during the meeting showcased the worst-case scenario for 60 Queens polling sites, some of which might need English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Bengali translations on the same page. If the city finds that the board can't change fonts, the worst-case ballot becomes the template for all the other ballots.

"I don't think language access and legibility need to be mutually exclusive," said Jerry Vattamala of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, which fought the board to broaden languages on the ballot. "When the board was first required to provide Chinese, they said it couldn't be done. But they were able to do it when required to."

Observers are hopeful that the commissioners will do what they can to make sure voters can both understand and read the ballots.

"A ballot with a 6-point font is going to be very difficult to read for many voters, particularly seniors and those without 20/20 vision," said Alex Camarda, director of public policy at Citizens Union, Gotham Gazette's sister organization.

Camarda suggested that the board look into using multiple pages for the ballot instead of forcing all the contests to the front of the ballot. He said he also supported the idea of varying font sizes "so the most readable ballots are created for as many voters as possible."

The commissioners decided to organize a conference call for Thursday to get the opinion of the city's corporation counsel before making a decision. The board won't reveal the content of the discussion until its next public hearing on Oct. 15.