https://www.pinalcentral.com/florence_reminder_blade_tribune/news/overseas-reporters-intrigued-by-pinals-radical-transparency/article_80eb4bc4-8a71-11ef-b655-8fb1fcb45e8c.html

TOP STORY

Overseas reporters intrigued by Pinal's 'radical transparency'

By MARK COWLING Staff Writer
Oct 17, 2024



Dana Lewis

Pinal County



Practical needs — not conspiracy theories — drove the design and construction of the Pinal County VOTES building, officials say.

Mark Cowling/PinalCentral

FLORENCE — More than just a local point of pride, the new Pinal VOTES building is garnering a fair share of international attention.

Reporters from Scandinavia, Belgium and France have recently visited or are scheduled to visit the deluxe new elections department at 320 W. Adamsville Road.

Pinal Communications Director James Daniels said Europe and the rest of the world routinely pay close attention to U.S. elections because of this country's global influence. Arizona further becomes a focus as a swing state, with controversies such as Maricopa County's lengthy recount of the 2020 vote and Pinal's own elections hiccups in 2022.

Add to that the new $32 million state-of-the-art elections building, and “that’s why they’ve all decided to reach out,” Daniels said.

Pinal County Recorder Dana Lewis, who runs Pinal elections, said a Washington Post article last month seems to have especially piqued the interest of overseas reporters with a comment about Pinal’s “radical transparency” to overcome public distrust.

The article used that term to describe protections such as GPS devices documenting every inch traveled by voting equipment and ballots; exposed wiring to show vote tabulators are not connected to the internet and potentially “hackable”; and the new building’s viewing room or “fishbowl” in which a visitor can witness every phase of vote gathering and counting on monitors or directly through glass walls into the adjacent rooms.

Lewis said from her point of view it’s not so radical, “it just seemed like a natural progression.” She said as Pinal’s early voting list grows, “that part of the process is intriguing to a lot of people.” Elections departments across the country offer the chance to view vote tabulation. Even Pinal’s formerly cramped quarters offered the ability to watch tabulation and have political observers present. “It just made sense” to expand this oversight to include tasks such as signature verification and receiving early ballots, Lewis said.

She said she doesn’t mind all the media attention during an already-busy election season.

“I haven’t read an article yet that I didn’t find a nuance to, or didn’t appreciate or respect the writing style. I don’t have anything bad to say about anything that’s going on right now as far as the news media.”

Some reporters, however, wonder how much of what Pinal does is in response to conspiracy theories, and “we have to educate them” on the practical reasons behind the new building, Daniels said.

“It was not (conspiracy theories) at all,” Lewis said. “The reason we created the facility is because we needed the space; the county is growing so fast. … We needed the space, we needed to reestablish institutional knowledge and ensure retention within the department.”

“When people don’t know what we do, it’s real easy for them to create stories in their minds,” she continued. Likewise, “It’s real easy to be transparent with some of our processes. Why not?” Lewis asked. “We even created a giant road map that explains what happens to a ballot after it’s cast and

what's going on in the different areas that can be seen from the viewing room."
Elections are bigger than they were 20 years ago, consolidated to include races at all levels and propositions for change. But Pinal has some "exceptional professionals … who are able to walk through the process, have a civil discussion and explain what we do and reassure voters," Lewis said.

Lewis said she hopes Pinal's many overseas voters — usually military members and their dependents — see some of this foreign coverage and take pride in what Pinal County is doing.

"My hope is that maybe they see one of these, and they see what's going on back home, what we're doing with their ballots. And how seriously we take them getting their ballot out by their deadline and how carefully we handle this process."

Lewis has recently received interview requests from Danish Broadcasting Corporation; Svenska Dagbladet, SvD.se (Swedish Daily News); De Tijd newspaper in Belgium; Weekendavisen, the largest weekly newspaper in Scandinavia (Denmark, Sweden and Norway); Agence France Presse; and France Télévisions, the French national public television broadcaster.

Interest is also high here, with people waiting for the doors to open and 1,100 people voting early the first two days it was available. A friend told Lewis she always took pride in being the first one to vote early at a particular location, but there were 18 people ahead of her on the first day, Oct. 9.

"People keep wanting to put a negative spin on what's going to happen this election season. So to hear the positive energy, and to hear people engaged again, for me that's a win," Lewis said.

Lewis is also on the ballot, with only a write-in opponent standing in the way of her reelection. Ordinarily, such a candidate wouldn't be fielding so many interview requests. But when reporters want to hear about how Pinal does elections, "I love this job that much that I think I need to make the time for it," she said.

Elections staff would like to have early ballots returned by Oct. 29. There are 17 secure and monitored drop boxes around Pinal County, besides the option of mailing them with free postage.

"Don't hold onto that early ballot until the last minute; get it to us about a week before," Lewis said.

Anyone who’s on the list for an early ballot but hasn’t received one should reach out. The last day to request an early ballot by mail is Oct. 25, Lewis said. The last day someone can vote early in person is Nov. 1. Voters may also go to their precinct polling place on Election Day Nov. 5. Polls open at 6 a.m. and close at 7 p.m.

Mark Cowling