Answering all your ballot "Advanced Processing" questions

Tom Currie, Natick RTC Chair, October 27, 2026
v2 update October 30, 2026

At last week's Natick RTC meeting (10/21/2026), we talked about the new step for Natick's elections. That is advanced processing of Vote By Mail ballots (VBM) and Early Voting ballots (EV) before Election Day. This is being done because of anticipated large volume of voters and two sheet ballot. It would delay precinct closings if they all needed to be done on Election Day.

I now have a good understanding of Natick's process and applicable law.

VBM ballots started being returned a few weeks ago (early October).

EV is two weeks in duration. October 17-October 30 in 2026 in Natick.

The last day to register to vote in Massachusetts was October 24, 2026.

Massachusetts law allows town clerks to process VBM and EV ballots no earlier than one day after voter registration ends. However, it also requires that reports (vote counts) not be run until polls close on Election Day.

There are checks in place to avoid voters handing in more than one ballot.

VBM and EV ballots are sealed in a signed envelope by the voter. The envelope has a bar code with the voter's name on it. This allows the envelope to be validated before the ballot is accessible. VBM is mailed in or put in a ballot drop box. EV ballots are put in a EV ballot box that is emptied daily be the Town Clerk's staff.

Sealed VBM and EV ballot envelopes are held securely by the Town Clerk in the vault until processing.
VBM ballots are scanned in as "received" then they arrive at the Town Clerk via mail or drop box. Status of the voter shows the VBM ballot was received, but the ballot has not been marked processed until it is time to open the envelope.

Voters who do EV are marked as "voted" and the ballot is processed when it is time to open the envelope.

If a VBM ballot has been received, a voter is not allowed to do EV.
If a voter did EV, and their VBM ballot arrives at the Clerk's office, the VBM ballot will be rejected.

When received, the signature on the VBM envelope is checked against the signature on the VBM request postcard by the Clerk's office. If they do not match, the VBM ballot is rejected and the voter is notified and sent a new ballot. I know of one such instance in Natick. Details on the mismatch are not known, but the person that told me indicated that an elderly family member did the entire process.

Natick had Advanced Opening on October 30, 9am-5pm. I was on that team as an election worker.

On that day, the team (~30 people) got all the sealed ballot envelopes from the Town Clerk. They were separated and processed by precinct. The team validated the envelopes via the bar code on the outside. The VBM barcode is scanned by the election check-in tablet. The database indicates that the voter's ballot is ready to be processed. EV envelopes need not be scanned because the bar code is printed and affixed to the envelope by the EV poll worker in the presence of the voter when they check in and their status changes to "voted."

The validated envelopes were opened and the ballot and envelope were separated. At this point the ballot can no longer be associated with a voter. The folded two page ballot was flattened and stacked with the others.
The team was informed of the number of envelopes to be opened that day. The number of ballot sheet 1 and ballot sheet 2s should match the number of envelopes. (Unless someone forgot to put one of the ballot sheets in the envelope)

Envelopes with an issue will be dealt with by the officials (Town Clerk, Registrars, etc). Problems include envelopes of voters who passed away between mailing their ballot and the Advanced Opening. It is also possible to come across a VBM envelope for a voter who did EV. If a voter returns both EV and VBM envelopes, one ballot will be rejected. This is most likely caught by the Clerk's staff when they receive the ballot (before Advanced Opening). This is easily noticed because the bar code stickers indicate the voting style and the database indicates which voting style has been completed. Mismatches are rejected. All the issues are segregated and dealt with such that each voter only gets one ballot into the system.

Once all the envelopes were validated and opened, the ballots were be put in a box per precinct and sealed via a zip tie with a serial number. The ballot envelopes are stored in a separate box.

The number of ballot envelopes must match the number of ballots scanned in the next step and also the number of "Advanced Processed" ballots in the

Clerk's election day tally. Some variation is expected due to a small number of rejected envelopes and folks that did not return both ballot cards.

The sealed boxes were put in the Town Clerk's vault.

That is the end of the "Advanced Opening" process. Next is "Advanced Processing" where ballots are fed into a tabulator.

Note that all VBM ballots that arrive via US mail or drop box October 30-Nov 3 will be processed on Election Day at the precincts.

October 31, a separate team will do "Advanced Processing."
One vote tabulator (the scanner that you put your ballot into on Election Day) will be setup to accept ballots. This means the ballot count starts at zero and it is set to "open poll" just like those at a precincts on Election Day.
The team will put all of the ballots into the tabulator by precinct. So there will be 10 ballot totals from Advanced Processing. "Totals" is the number of ballots, not election results.

There are 26,711 voters in Natick. There were 7412 VBM and EV ballot envelopes were available for Advanced Opening on 10/30/26.

Once all the VBM and EV ballots are in the tabulator, the tabulator will be closed and locked without a report being run. It may be powered down before being closed and locked. When it is powered back on, the tabulator does not run a report automatically. This way the votes can be put in the tabulator on Saturday and the report can be run on Tuesday.

On Election Day, November 3, 8pm, vote totals will be taken from 10 precincts and the one VBM/EV tabulator. The Clerk will add up the numbers and post election results with vote counts.

My opinion is that the Natick Election process is secure and aligned with Massachusetts law.
Thanks to all the Natick RTC members who are poll workers and those that play the roll of election observer.