**Longer early voting (continued)**Eau Claire intends to expand its early voting next year, adding evening hours so people who work 9-to-5 jobs can cast an absentee ballot at City Hall in weeks leading up to elections. In Eau Claire’s proposed 2020 budget, city clerk Carrie Riepl included $8,000 to staff the elections office for the additional hours to expand opportunities for local residents to vote. “It’s important that people in the city are able to vote,” she said. “We’re hoping that expanding the hours will allow people who couldn’t vote before to get downtown and vote.”

The city has offered weeks of early voting previously, which Riepl said has been growing in popularity through the years. Eau Claire’s early voting begins two weeks before primary elections in February and August, three weeks prior to April’s local, state and presidential primary elections and six weeks in advance of the November general election, which will include the presidential race next year. Eau Claire residents have been able to cast in-person absentee ballots during City Hall’s regular business hours — 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays.

But Riepl’s proposal would keep the elections office open until 8 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays for the week prior to smaller-turnout elections and for three weeks leading up to November’s election. Riepl hopes the expanded hours will be a permanent change, but said usage of them will be tracked to see how many people choose to vote on those evenings in 2020 to determine if they should be adjusted in following years.

She mentioned the change to voting hours during Tuesday’s budget work session, getting positive feedback from City Council members. The city’s budget process is ongoing with more work sessions this month, leading up to final approval slated for Nov. 12. Next year is expected to be a busy election year, something the city anticipates every time the U.S. presidency is on the ballot every four years. The city is increasing its funding for elections by about $250,000 in the proposed 2020 budget — the usual increase for high-turnout years.

Riepl also is looking to boost her roster of people interested in working for part or all of Election Day at city polling places. Residents of Eau Claire or Chippewa counties who are 18 or older are eligible to work as poll workers and can sign up at City Hall. The city is preparing not only for the Nov. 3 general election, but also others leading up to that. The presidential primary will be April 7, alongside elections for Eau Claire City Council president, Eau Claire school board, Eau Claire County Board, an Eau Claire County judge and a state Supreme Court justice. And another primary is slated for Aug. 11, should there be multiple candidates from the same political party vying for state Legislature and U.S. House seats that will be elected on Nov. 3 alongside the U.S. president.

With Wisconsin delivering electoral votes key to President Donald Trump’s victory in 2016, the Chippewa Valley is bracing for likely presidential campaign visits as the area is expected to be a political battleground next year. In its portion of the 2020 proposed city budget, the Eau Claire Police Department alluded to anticipated visits from national politicians. Though not tied to an expected dollar amount, the budget mentions the department’s patrol division will “provide a safe environment for anticipated presidential visits with minimal disruption to the community.”

Numerous newspapers have written about political campaigns leaving unpaid bills behind for the beefed up security cities provide when candidates visit. In July, the Leader-Telegram reported that neither the Trump nor Hillary Clinton campaigns have paid bills sent by the city for their April 2016 visits to Eau Claire.