


ROSEVILLE
REQUEST FOR COUNCIL ACTION

Date: February 9, 2009
Item No.: 10.a

Department Approval

City Manager Approval

W. J. Mahonen

Item Description: Discuss Possible Changes to How Elections are Conducted in Minnesota

1 **BACKGROUND**

2 By any definition, the November 2008 election was historical. Voter turnout was among the
3 highest ever seen. In Roseville 90.5% of registered voters voted, and 17.3% of the voters voted
4 by absentee ballot. This compared with 10.3% statewide. More than 15% of new voters
5 registered to vote this election.

6
7 The November election also pointed out drawbacks to the current election system. In Minnesota
8 voters may use the absentee voting process if they meet certain criteria – absent from the
9 precinct, illness or disability, serving as an election judge in another precinct or religious
10 observance preventing them from going to the polls. It was clearly evident that many voters did
11 not meet that criteria but voted by absentee ballot anyway. Using the absentee process to vote is
12 extremely expensive, labor intensive and vulnerable to human error.

13
14 Several groups and individuals are working with the Legislature to propose changes to the
15 current election system that would eliminate or lessen costs and human error. These changes
16 would also make it easier for the voter to cast his/her vote. Two options being suggested include:

17
18 Early Voting

19 Roughly 30 states allow early voting where any voter can come to City Hall to vote in the days
20 or weeks before election day. Voters complete the ballot and feed it through the voting machine,
21 eliminating the need for envelopes and the possibility of human error which could prevent their
22 ballot from counting.

23
24 Mail Only Election

25 The state of Oregon and parts of Washington, California and Colorado use the mail only
26 elections, eliminating the need of polling places. Ballots are mailed to all registered voters and it
27 is up to the voter to return the ballot by election day. Voters have a personal identification
28 number (PIN), usually their driver's license or passport number, which they include on the ballot
29 envelope. Unregistered voters use the absentee voting process to request a ballot.

30

31 Advocates for changes to the election process are cautiously optimistic that the Legislature will
32 adopt these or other changes to the election process. They also know some people are reluctant
33 to commit to change without first testing it to see if it works in Minnesota. If the state is
34 unwilling to adopt these changes statewide, supporters suggest setting up a pilot project testing
35 early voting and/or mail only elections in a rural, suburban and urban areas and in cities of small,
36 medium or large populations.

37 **POLICY OBJECTIVE**

38 Consider asking our legislative delegation to support legislation in which Roseville would be a
39 pilot city for testing early voting and/or mail only elections.

40 **FINANCIAL IMPACTS**

41 Unknown, although anecdotally other governmental entities indicate a cost savings under both
42 methods of voting.

43 **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

44 Roseville has a substantially higher percent of voters who “vote early,” so it would be a good
45 place to test innovative election changes.

46 **REQUESTED COUNCIL ACTION**

47 Discuss whether Roseville should advocate to test early voting and mail only elections.

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49

Prepared by: Carolyn Curti, Elections Coordinator

Attachments: A: Yuma Daily Sun Opinion Piece – Mail-only election? Lots of reasons to do it
B: Common Cause – Vote by Mail Elections
C: Aspen Times Article – Little confusion, higher turnout with mail ballots
D: 866ourvote.org - Early & Absentee Voting
E: WBAL TV- Early Voting Draws Support, Criticism
F: AlterNet – Now It’s Clear Why Some People Are Scared of Early Voting: Because It Empowers People

OPINION Mail-only election? Lot of reasons to do it

December 14, 2008 - The Yuma Daily Sun

Terry Ross

Dec. 14, 2008 (McClatchy-Tribune Regional News delivered by Newstex) -- An innovative idea is being considered for a possible May vote on continuing the city of Yuma's hospitality tax.

City Clerk Brigitta Kuiper has proposed to the Yuma City Council that the special election -- if approved by the council -- be an all-mail election, a first for Yuma County to my knowledge and a rarity for the nation as a whole.

My online research indicates that Oregon has had some success with this method which has helped that state reduce the cost of elections. Oregon has conducted them regularly for more than two decades. Some other states allow them also, but only for limited purposes.

There is real value in the concept.

Kuiper points out it eliminates the cost of having polling places and staffing them. Getting workers to handle polling sites tends to be difficult because relatively few people want to do it. Often they are retirees who have the ability to drop everything for a one-day job.

Contrary to what some believe, it is not necessarily that easy working at polling sites. The hours can be long. In the November election, some poll workers had to be there nearly 20 hours. They started setting up the sites up at about 5 a.m. so they would be ready to open at 7 a.m., and some workers had to stay there until 11 p.m. or so due to delays and and long lines of voters.

Workers do not simply leave when the polls close officially. Whoever is in line at 7 p.m., the time set to close, must be given the opportunity to vote, no matter how long it takes. Then workers break down and close out the polling sites, much like they did when they opened the polls.

It would be so much simpler to mail out ballots to everyone who could then either mail them in or drop them off at the election office where they would be counted.

Depending on the scope of the election, and how many work polling sites, it can also be expensive.

There would probably still need to be some temporary workers at election time, but it would likely be far less that it would take to staff polling sites.

However, the city clerk doesn't necessarily see this as a big money saver. There is still the cost of mailing ballots to all registered voters, and paying the return postage of those who choose to participate.

Still, Oregon has apparently found there can be some savings.

Even with limited savings, Kuiper sees advantages, as I do.

--It would be more convenient for voters. Many -- approaching 70 percent -- who currently vote in city elections already choose this option. A majority of area residents -- by choosing the optional mail-in ballots -- are already telling officials that this is the method of voting they prefer.

Yes, it is true some people prefer actually going to the polls. It gives them more of a sense of participation and civic pride. And some also distrust the mail-in ballot system, thinking it is more open to fraud.

But times change and, as noted earlier, the number of voters wanting to mail their ballots grows in each election cycle. The time is coming when it won't make economic sense to maintain polling places any longer, and certainly not in the number we currently do.

--Mail-only elections would also eliminate provisional ballots, the ones which have to be verified because people coming to the polls don't have required identification or may have changed addresses without notifying election officials.

Mail ballots are not allowed to be forwarded and are returned to the election office. So those who fail to give notification of their move would have to correct their information in order to vote. Ballot rolls would be cleared of people who did not meet identification requirements -- or who had died or were otherwise ineligible -- resulting in more accurate voting rolls.

These provisional ballots often significantly delay vote counting. In recent elections this has resulted in final results being delayed for a week or more. That is unacceptable and having a mail-in election would help fix that problem.

The only remaining question I have about the mail-only election is why haven't we done this before?

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Vote by Mail Elections

Vote By Mail (VBM) elections can increase turnout by four to five percentage points in general elections and significantly more in local or off-year elections. Rather than sparking participation among citizens who never vote, it appears that the added convenience of voting by mail serves primarily to retain higher participation among those voters who tend to vote in general elections by making it easier for them to vote in traditionally lower-interest local, special, or nonpartisan elections.



Click here to download a printer-friendly version of our "Vote By Mail" report.

Among the other benefits of mail balloting are a reduction in logistical problems associated with in-person voting on Election Day, a reduction in poll-worker requirements, increased opportunities to conduct voter mobilization, minimizing the appeal of last-minute attack ads, providing more time for voters to fill out their ballots, the potential to save both time and money, and deterring fraud more efficiently than photo-ID requirements used with in-person polling.

There are also some potential problems with voting by mail, but these can be mitigated or eliminated by using the following recommended practices for Vote By Mail elections.

Recommended Vote by Mail Practices

- 1) Election officials should provide candidates, parties, and interest groups with free lists of registered voters and update them at least twice a week as ballots are returned so that candidates, parties and voters can see whose votes have been received.
- 2) Voters who do not wish to vote by mail should be able to cast ballots in private booths at vote centers staffed with trained election workers in the days leading up to and on Election Day.
- 3) Vote by mail programs should adopt the practice of requiring voters to sign ballot envelopes and comparing those signatures to the signatures on the voters' registration files. Election workers must also use statewide databases to ensure that only one ballot is cast per voter.
- 4) VBM should not be viewed as a solution to the deeper problem of complete non-participation by much of the eligible electorate. Other measures must be taken to address the lack of civic involvement that reduces the quality of our collective decision-making.
- 5) In states that currently have permanent absentee voter programs, moving to elections where every registered voter is mailed a ballot should reduce the demographic disparities in voter turnout because the benefits of added convenience apply to all voters rather than those who self-select to participate in the program.
- 6) In VBM elections, ballots must be sent to all registered voters, including inactive voters.
- 7) Vote by mail elections should be heavily publicized via mailings, newspaper ads,

and radio public service announcements at the time ballots are mailed out and in the final days before an election.

8) Steps should be taken to deter, detect, and correct coercion and vote-buying while casting a Vote By Mail ballot.

9) Election officials should contact voters by phone, postcard, or e-mail if their ballot is deemed uncountable due to lack of a signature match and give the voter the opportunity to correct it.

10) Election officials should work closely with the U.S. Postal Service to ensure timely and accurate delivery of ballots.

11) Jurisdictions using Vote By Mail must also maintain in-person polling alternatives to allow disabled and language assisted voting on accessible equipment.

12) Election officials should allow citizens to use election headquarters as their voter registration address and then allow these citizens to pick up ballots at election headquarters during the entire VBM election period.

Click here to download the rest of our report, "**Getting it Straight for 2008: What We Know About Vote by Mail Elections, and How to Conduct Them Well.**"

LEARN MORE

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Little confusion, higher turnout with mail ballots

JOHN COLSON,

Mail-only elections in Garfield and Eagle counties apparently caused little confusion and may have helped raise voter turnout.

Officials reported only a small number of voters in Garfield and Eagle counties puzzled about what to do and where to go in this week's mail-only election process, a method that's gaining in popularity across the state and nation.

"We had a few people upset," Garfield County Clerk Mildred Alsdorf said. "I would say we didn't have more than half a dozen."

And most of those, she said, were at the satellite clerk's office in Rifle.

Alsdorf said about 250 of the 1,500 voters who came into the clerk's office either in Rifle or the main courthouse in Glenwood Springs were there to request replacement ballots or because they had moved and never received their ballots in the mail. The rest were there to drop off their ballots instead of mailing them.

In Carbondale, according to receptionist Shandey Page, there were a few confused voters. But Town Clerk Marcia Walter said there were fewer than six.

She said most of those who came in were "thinking it was an either-or option" to vote by mail or go to the polling place. "I told them, 'Sorry, it's a mail ballot,'" and that they had to go to the county clerk's office in Glenwood Springs to get a replacement ballot.

In Eagle County, where the ballot also was mail-only, Clerk Teak Simonton said the result was similar to that in Garfield County.

"There was some confusion," she said.

"There were several hundred voters who asked, 'What is a mail-in ballot?'" she said. "There was a very small group of voters that wasn't aware of what was going on."

At Basalt's Town Hall, one of the places where Eagle County voters in the Roaring Fork Valley are used to going on election day, very few voters showed up in confusion.

"I had, like, two," said Town Clerk Pam Schilling. She said she sent them to the Eagle County Community Center in El Jebel to pick up replacement ballots.

This was Simonton's first time managing a mail-only election, she said. She estimated the costs were about 20 percent lower than a polling-place election.

And, she said, "Logistically, I think it's easier for the voter," which could be part of the reason both Eagle and Garfield counties had better voter turnout than Pitkin County. Eagle and Garfield turnout was 43 percent and 45 percent, respectively. Pitkin's was 29 percent.

"Mail-in always gets a better turnout in odd-year elections," Pitkin County Clerk and Recorder Silvia Davis said.

Pitkin County's one attempt at a mail-only election in the mid-1990s resulted in a fair number of complaints from voters. The county has since relied primarily on Election Day polling.

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<http://www.aspentimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051104/NEWS/111040032&template=printart>

Early & Absentee Voting

Most states permit registered voters to cast a ballot-in-person prior to Election Day. This is called "early voting" and thirty-four states and the District of Columbia permit their residents to vote early in-person.¹ Some of these states require their residents to cast their early vote at a single, centralized location (e.g., the board of elections office), while other states establish multiple early voting sites. Additionally, these thirty-four states and the District of Columbia differ with respect to the situations where residents may vote early in-person. In most states, voters may cast an early, in-person vote for any reason or no reason at all ("no-excuse voting"). In four of these states, residents must state a reason for requesting to cast an early vote and that reason must be on the state's list of permissible reasons.² Permissible reasons include an early, in-person vote include absence from the state on Election Day, illness, incapacity or military deployment outside of the jurisdiction.

Early voting is similar to absentee voting. Absentee voters must first request and later mail back a completed ballot to election officials prior to Election Day. Every state and the District of Columbia permit absentee voting, but unlike early voting where most states do not require an excuse, twenty-two states and the District of Columbia require an excuse to vote absentee by mail. The permissible reasons for absentee voting are similar to those permitted for early voting.

While early and absentee voting should, in theory, provide individuals with an increased opportunity to cast a meaningful ballot, they have not been without their share of problems. For example, some states will not prepare sufficiently for early voting and individuals wishing to cast an early vote will be forced to wait in long-lines or have to drive long distances to reach their state board of elections office. Additionally, some voters who request absentee ballots will either not receive them at all or will receive the ballots too late to return them by Election Day.

¹<http://www.earlyvoting.net/states/abslaws.php>

²Kentucky, Montana, Virginia and the District of Columbia

Early Voting Draws Support, Criticism

POSTED: 6:43 pm EDT October 20, 2008

UPDATED: 7:37 pm EDT October 20, 2008

ANNAPOLIS, Md. -- Maryland voters will decide when they vote Nov. 4 whether to join 31 other states that currently allow early voting, but the idea is seeing some opposition.

Early voting is meant to give voters more time and more flexibility to cast their ballots. Curbsides, grocery stores, shopping malls and libraries could all be polling places under early voting, WBAL TV 11 News reporter David Collins said.

Supporters of the idea applauded the concept as providing greater access to the polls.

"Early voting provides opportunities for people who work long hours, who may work far away from their home so they can't get to the polling place easily," said Nancy Soreng, vice president of the League of Women Voters.

Question 1 on the November ballot in Maryland amends the state constitution to authorize the General Assembly to pass legislation that creates an early voting process.

It would allow ballots to be cast up to two weeks before Election Day. It also allows for a no-excuse absentee ballot, meaning voters would no longer have to sign an oath indicating that they won't be in town to vote in person.

Many Republicans said they are opposed. Anne Arundel County Sen. Janet Greenip said that absentee ballots make the initiative unnecessary and is concerned that it could lead to voter fraud because it allows people to vote anywhere in the state, regardless of where they are registered.

"Anybody who can't make it on Election Day already has an out. There's a problem, also, with keeping the polls open. We're talking about a minimum of three polls per county for 14 days. How do we know that those machines -- or whatever we are using -- are secure?" Greenip said. The General Assembly authorized early voting in the 2005 and 2006 sessions, but then-Gov. Robert Ehrlich vetoed both bills in part because Democrats identified specific polling places where early voting could take place.

The General Assembly overrode the 2006 veto, but the Court of Appeals declared it unconstitutional, ruling that early voting clashed with the state constitution, specifically spelling out the date, place and time for voting.

"We are setting a precedent right now that for the first time ever, we don't have an Election Day," Greenip said.

"This only authorizes the General Assembly to create a mechanism so up to two weeks before an election, voters can go to a polling place that may or may not be in their own district and cast their ballots," Soreng said.

If passed, many officials said they expect a battle at the State House over costs and where the early voting polls will be located.



Now It's Clear Why Some People Are Scared of Early Voting: Because It Empowers People

By Pam Kapoor, AlterNet

Posted on November 2, 2008, Printed on February 3, 2009

<http://www.alternet.org/story/105744/>

"I've thought of more excuses why not to vote, why not to do this," Bobby told us. "And each time, it has cost me more than it would have cost me to get up off my a** -- excuse my French -- and try to make a change."

So said Bobby Johnson in the back of one of our Vote Today Ohio shuttles. When he spotted our van at the Bishop Cosgrove Centre, a food pantry in Cleveland, he climbed right on in. He hadn't voted in years, but on October 4th, 2008, Bobby became one of the 67,408 Ohioans who cast a ballot during the first week of Ohio's new Early Voting period.

We have seen and heard Bobby's story repeated from Cincinnati to Youngstown, from Athens to Toledo. So many unlikely voters we drove to Ohio Early Voting Centers represent this truth: elections are changing. You might even say democracy itself, in fact, is changing. For the better.

Ohio no longer has an Election Day. Innovative updating of the process has now yielded an Election Month. And we've seen the embracing of this change in the faces of the very voters most positively impacted by it.

This year, an estimated 1 out of 3 Americans will cast their ballot either through absentee or early voting. Colorado is even expected to see half its turnout amongst early voters. Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner opened Early Voting Centers in every county on September 30 and will keep them open through November 3. She has gone openly and vehemently on the record as supporting Early Voting as a means of broadening access, and estimates that "25 percent of Ohio's registered voters, or the number of voters voting, will have voted before Election Day."

Um, so what?

Political operatives will need awhile to figure out just how Early Voting will alter the longstanding rules of campaigning. But everyone -- even armchair observers -- recognizes the impact early voters could have on overall election results. Consider that after all the counts were recounted, Bush took Ohio in 2004 by roughly 100,000 votes (and squeaked in Florida by a mere 527 votes). Campaigners on either side of the spectrum see the value of locking in those sorts of numbers within the early voting window. Every vote sizzles with relevance: the 3300 voters we (Vote Today Ohio) transported represent far more than a drop in the bucket. Of the 9264 people who this year voted during Golden Week in Franklin County (home to Columbus), we moved 1369 of them -- that's 14.8 percent of the early vote in Franklin County. It's safe to assume that hundreds of thousands of Ohioans have learned about early voting directly from our work. That's powerful.

After having spent the last four weeks helping Ohioans take advantage of the early voting scheme, we are even more convinced that early voting enhances democracy. It allows more people to vote -- plain and simple. Most Americans take voting seriously, but it's not like Election Day is a national holiday. Oh no -- voters are expected to tuck the task of ballot casting in between work and school and commuting and all the realities of modern life. Never mind the notorious polling center line-ups and moody machines that Ohioans know all too well, or GOP intimidation (the Huffington Post recently reported that Republicans intend to place 3,600 paid recruits inside Ohio polling places on Election Day to challenge the qualifications of certain voters).

Our vans have transported all manner of Ohioans -- of Bobby Johnsons -- who are unlikely to have voted otherwise. Nick drove an elderly Dayton man to vote early who figured his absentee ballot would be lost at the housing project where he lives. Caty drove Columbus college students who were too excited to wait until November 4. Erik drove a transient Cincinnati woman who for forty years, has abstained from elections, thinking her vote didn't matter. Rafiq has driven countless young Cleveland men who most people fear or overlook as part of the urban scenery.

Moving nearly 3500 Ohioans to Early Voting Centers has helped us understand all too well why opponents would devote precious time and resources to convincing the public that early voting is trouble: because it helps bring marginalized people in from the margins. And that must threaten them to the bone. Challenging democracy, indeed.

Vote Today Ohio is eagerly calling any and all volunteers to help with the final push.

Pam Kapoor is the Media Director of Vote Today Ohio.

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