

VOTE GREEN, SAVE GREEN - VOTE BY MAIL

SUMMARY

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury initiated an investigation of the county's voting process to determine if something could be changed to save money. The Grand Jury learned that the biggest opportunity for cost savings would be to convert to a 100% vote-by-mail system. In doing so, the county could go green in two ways: reduce the costs associated with polling place voting and reduce the impact of vehicle emissions on the environment.

The term "vote-by-mail" replaced the prior terminology of "absentee voter." The original intent of an absentee ballot was to enable military personnel and voters who would not be home during an election period to cast their votes. Since 2002, anyone can request to be a vote-by-mail voter. At that same time, the Registrar of Voters encouraged voters to apply, and their offices were inundated with 40,000 vote-by-mail applications. The vote-by-mail process is more convenient for voters allowing them to vote early, on their own schedule, and from their home or any location.

The Grand Jury looked into the voting process logistics and associated costs. To set up for an election, the costs include transporting voting booths, equipment and ballots. In a general election, there are 230 polling places in Sonoma County. The Grand Jury found that if vote-by-mail was implemented as the primary voting method, money could be saved in printing, transportation, and labor costs.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors support the Registrar of Voters by encouraging vote-by-mail efforts locally and via state legislation.

In the last presidential election, Sonoma County voters had the highest turnout of the 58 California counties. By achieving this distinction, the residents of Sonoma County clearly have shown a desire to vote. We encourage them now to vote by mail to save the county money and to be green at the same time.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury spoke to employees of the Registrar of Voters office, the County Clerk-Recorder-Assessor office, members of the League of Women Voters, various citizens who are currently registered to vote at the polls, and others who vote by mail.

A large number of documents were reviewed – see the listing in the Bibliography.

DISCUSSION

As of December 15, 2011, there were 248,787 registered voters in Sonoma County. The breakdown between the parties is: 128,800 (52%) Democrat; 55,600 (22%) Republican; 51,751 (21%) Independent or with no party affiliation; 5,773 (2%) American Independent; 4,592 (1.8%) Green Party; and the balance being parties that are not formally recognized. The number of vote-by-mail voters has been as low as 56% in the November 2006 election and as high as 78% in the June 2008 election. Currently, Sonoma County ranks second to Santa Clara County in the State of California for the highest percentage of vote-by-mail voters. The cost to vote by mail runs approximately \$2-

\$3 per voter. In previous elections, the overall costs at the polls were found to be as high as \$6.38 per voter.

The costs to the county for those who vote at the polls can be significantly higher than for those who vote by mail. Costs vary by the number of voters who turn out. In a county-wide general election, there are costs to deliver supplies to the polling places, to train and pay poll workers, and to print ballots and additional information packets for each of the 230 polling places within the county. The overall cost can run close to \$1.5 million for a general election. Some costs are recovered by billing the involved jurisdictions; however, it does not recover the full cost of the election.

Sonoma County will have five elections during the 2011-2012 fiscal year, including special elections (for initiatives and ballot measures) and general elections. Ballot counting starts with the vote-by-mail ballots when the polls close at 8 p.m. on Election Day. Signatures on those ballots are verified by machines earlier in the week. Trucks begin picking up polling place ballots at 8 p.m. and deliver them through the night to the office of the Registrar of Voters for counting.

The county's computer system is not old in itself; however, the system for counting all ballots is outdated and will be obsolete in coming years. The county has done a good job maintaining the system to date but needs to upgrade it and replace outdated software. If the system is allowed to become obsolete, the integrity of the voting process in Sonoma County could be jeopardized.

The ability of a county to require 100% vote-by-mail is determined by the California legislature. The legislature has not been supportive of the initiative to implement 100% vote-by-mail. The initiative is supported by the Registrar of Voters in Sonoma County and in 55 of the remaining 57 California counties. Currently, Yolo County is running a pilot program to see how 100% vote-by-mail could work. Until they are done with that trial, nothing will move forward for any other California county to require 100% vote-by-mail.

In the interim, Sonoma County and its residents can support the Registrar of Voters and choose this voting method. Citizens can request or download an application to become registered vote-by-mail voters. An additional benefit to increasing the number of vote-by-mail voters is that it helps to speed up the counting process, which enables the county to report results faster.

Anyone can become a permanent vote-by-mail voter by answering six questions on an application (see Appendix). If a voter fails to vote in two consecutive general primaries, s/he must return to voting at a polling location or reapply to vote by mail.

The Registrar of Voters in Sonoma County supports the 100% vote-by-mail legislation. The Grand Jury supports it as well.

FINDINGS

- F1. Historically, large numbers of voters in Sonoma County have responded favorably to efforts by the Registrar of Voters that encourage people to register for vote-by-mail.
- F2. The general public is unsure what the qualifications and benefits are of becoming a vote-by-mail voter.
- F3. The Registrar of Voters office has budget constraints that restrict its ability to encourage the vote-by-mail option except when election materials are sent out.

F4. The software system used to count ballots needs to be replaced in the near future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors support the Registrar of Voters in attempts to bolster the number of county residents who wish to vote by mail by assisting the Registrar to find funding to promote vote-by-mail participation.

R2. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors support the need of the Registrar of Voters to replace the outdated elections management ballot counting system.

R3. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors support the Sonoma County legal liaison to the state legislature to promote changing the law allowing Sonoma County to require 100% vote-by-mail.

R4. The office of the Registrar of Voters develop some way(s) to communicate to the voters of Sonoma County the qualifications and benefits of voting by mail.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses from the following:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors - R1, R2, and R3
- Sonoma County Registrar of Voters - R4

The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Turnout History - primary and general elections for the last 10 years
- Polling sites with voting precincts - 2008 and 2010
- Election Billings Report - 2000 to 2010
- County of Sonoma Election Cost Estimates - 2012
- District Registration By Party and Language - 2000 and 2010
- Comparison of Turnout Pre and Post Permanent Vote By Mail
- Sonoma County Voter Turnout Showing Vote By Mail Percentages - dated 2-29-2012

APPENDIX

Vote-By-Mail Application

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPLICATION FOR A VOTE BY MAIL BALLOT FOR THE

Date of Election:

To obtain a Vote by Mail ballot, complete the information on this form. A mailed application must be received by the elections official no later than 5 p.m. 7 days before Election Day.

1. **PRINT NAME** (first, middle name or initial, and last):

2. **DATE OF BIRTH** (month, day, year):

3. **RESIDENCE ADDRESS IN SONOMA COUNTY** (number and street; P.O. Box not accepted):

City:

Zip Code:

4. **TELEPHONE NUMBER** (daytime):

(evening):

5. **PRINT MAILING ADDRESS FOR BALLOT** (*If different from above*). **NOTE:** Organizations distributing this form may not preprint mailing address.

Number and Street or P.O. Box:

City:

Zip Code:

6. I am not presently affiliated with any political party. However, for the Primary Election only, I request an absentee ballot for the Party.*

**THIS APPLICATION WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED WITHOUT THE PROPER
SIGNATURE OF THE APPLICANT.**

I have not applied, nor do I intend to apply, for an absentee ballot from any other jurisdiction for this election. I certify under **penalty of perjury** under the laws of the State of California that the name, address and information I have provided are true and correct.

Signature:

Date:

WARNING: Perjury is punishable by imprisonment in state prison for two, three or four years. (Section 126 of the California Penal Code)

THIS FORM WAS PROVIDED BY: Sonoma County Registrar of Voters Office, 435 Fiscal Drive, P. O. Box 11488 Santa Rosa, CA 95406-1488 (707) 565-6800

Check here if you wish to become a Permanent Vote by Mail Voter. State law allows any voter who so requests to be a Permanent Vote by Mail Voter. If you check the above box, a Vote by Mail Ballot will automatically be sent to you for future elections. Failure to vote in any two consecutive statewide general elections will cancel your Permanent Vote by Mail Status and you will need to reapply. If you have questions concerning voting by Vote by Mail ballot telephone (707) 565-6806 or 1-800-750-VOTE.
Elections Code §3201(a)(b)

NOTICE

You have the legal right to mail or deliver this application directly to the local election official of the County where you reside.

SONOMA COUNTY ADDRESS:

REGISTRAR OF VOTERS
435 FISCAL DR
P.O. BOX 11488
SANTA ROSA CA 95406-1488
(707) 565-6800 or 1 (800) 750-VOTE.

Returning this application to anyone other than your elections official may cause a delay that could interfere with your right or ability to vote.

The format on this application **MUST** be used by **ALL** individuals, organizations and groups that distribute absentee ballot applications.

Elections Code §3007

Failure to conform to this format may result in criminal prosecution.

Elections Code §18402

* In order to determine which parties allow Decline to State voters to vote in their primary elections, contact the Secretary of State's toll-free number: 1-800-345-VOTE.

Elections Code §3201