

KING COUNTY ELECTIONS MOVING TO VOTE BY MAIL

Report to the King County Executive • Prepared by Dean C. Logan, Director

January 31, 2006



**King County
Elections**



**Records, Elections and
Licensing Services Division**
Department of
Executive Services

Letter to the Executive.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Background.....	8
Weighing the Options.....	10
Design Recommendations.....	14
Summary of Team Analysis.....	17
Critical Path Timelines and Decision Points.....	18
Preliminary Financial Assessment.....	21
Recommendations.....	24
Conclusion.....	30

Appendix

Executive News Release.....	A1
Stakeholder Input Summary.....	B1
Staff Input Summary.....	C1
Core Planning Team Report.....	D1
Vote By Mail: The Multnomah County Experience..	E1

Records, Elections and Licensing Services Division King County Department of Executive Services

January 31, 2006

Dear Executive Sims:

At your request and in partnership with King County Elections' staff, I have prepared the attached report on moving King County to an all vote-by-mail elections system. This report represents the starting point of a comprehensive implementation process that is designed to ensure that our elections process is secure, accountable and responsive to the citizens of King County.

As you pointed out in your December 20, 2005 press conference, after a year of successful election reform and good reports from independent election observers, it is time to take the next step in the continuous improvement of King County Elections. It is time to move to an all-mail ballot election system.

Our recommendation is to take the momentum achieved through process and organizational improvements demonstrated during the 2005 election cycle and apply them to an implementation plan that establishes an all-mail voting system in King County by the 2007 primary.

Implementation should begin immediately by submitting a proposed ordinance authorizing all King County elections to be conducted by mail beginning with the 2007 primary. In the interim, active efforts to promote voting by mail should continue. A vote-by-mail project team should be established immediately within the Elections Section to oversee implementation.

Parallel to the vote-by-mail implementation project, the current election environment must remain stable. Public confidence and voter acceptance of the transition to all-mail elections will depend on the reliability and accountability of elections administered as the new system is developed and adopted. Adequate resources must be allotted to ensure that both current operations and the implementation project are able to achieve success.

An all-mail ballot system will reduce the complexity of our elections and make it easier for people to vote. Voting by mail increases voter participation, provides for greater transparency in the processing of ballots, and empowers voters to cast their votes when and where they choose to do so.

Following a successful implementation process, we will be the largest jurisdiction in the nation to conduct all elections by mail. In doing so, we have the opportunity to be a regional and national model for elections management. Our recommendations were formed with that in mind.

I look forward to working with you on this important endeavor.

Respectfully submitted,



Dean C. Logan, Director



**King County
Elections**

King County Elections Mission Statement

We are public service professionals dedicated to the administration of accessible, open and impartial elections. With pride, fairness and integrity we strive to ensure the opportunity for all to participate in democracy.

-adopted by staff, May 2004

Vision Statement for Vote-by-Mail Planning

King County Elections will be conducted in a transparent manner that fosters the highest level of public trust and confidence.

Changes to the administration of elections will be made in partnership with the electorate and other stakeholders.

Planning Objective

Adopt and implement a vote-by-mail election system to:

- Simplify and streamline election administration
- Be a model jurisdiction for accountability, accuracy and transparency
 - Increase voter participation
 - Enhance access to voting

“

Vote-by-mail is the right direction for our electorate. It streamlines the elections process, allows our staff to focus on a single system for serving voters, and it increases voter turnout.”

Ron Sims, King County Executive, December 20, 2005

Introduction

Washington State continues to have one of the largest overall voter turnouts in the country – and no matter what changes are made to the process, Washingtonians love to vote. That passion for democracy is greater than any change or mild inconvenience a voter might experience as we progress with new systems, new laws and regulations, new technology, and lots of new voters.

In the past four years, we have seen dozens of challenges: a new primary system, razor-thin close elections, increased monitoring, court decisions which alter election processes, increased challenges of voters eligible to vote, and a hotbed of news headlines for actions that used to be too boring to note.

Now, the voters are triggering the next major election change. As they vote in increasing numbers by mail, it is time to move to one system, so we all vote by mail.

We take our lead from the voters.

Our job is to listen to voters; to make voting accessible and to make the entire voting experience transparent, building public trust and confidence along the way.

When we need to make changes, we acknowledge it and ask voters to work with us in creating the kind of change we need.

Now, as more than 70 percent of the voters in recent elections cast their ballots by mail, it's time to make another change. Following the trend and success of 29 other Washington counties and the state of Oregon, it is time to conduct all elections by mail.

When it comes to making changes to the voting process, we are dedicated to making those changes in partnership with the voters, especially those involved with new mandates required by federal, state or local laws. For the last year, we have been working with voters and other stakeholders to prepare for a change to all vote-by-mail elections in King County through public meetings, focus groups, e-mail surveys, and special roundtables with party representatives.

We are ready to make the change, and we believe voters are too.

How did we get here?

Voting by mail is a western states' phenomenon. Indeed, 17 states allow for voting by mail, although many require a reason to vote by mail. Hence the identification of voting by mail has been called "absentee balloting." If you can't get to the polls on Election Day, you vote an absentee ballot.

Washington State, however, has always made it easy for people to vote by mail. Our laws do not require voters to provide a reason to vote absentee; voters do not have to be "absent" from their polling area to request a ballot. Ten years ago, less than 30 percent of the people in Washington State chose to vote by mail. Today, the number fluctuates between 70 and 80 percent in any given election with 60 percent of all registered voters signed up to automatically vote by absentee ballot.

Why vote-by-mail?

Currently, we have two separate systems for voting: in-person voting at the polls and absentee voting by mail. This requires two different processes, two different sets of trainings, two different sets of voters to process, and two different systems to count.

Is it costly? Yes.

Is it efficient? No.

Voting by mail means we move to a single, common voting system. It means simpler instructions for voters and more streamlined and efficient systems for election workers. As we move to voting by mail, there will be fewer provisional ballots and decreased dependency on manual processes. Voting by mail offers the opportunity to eventually provide something new for voters that they have told us they want: the ability to track their own ballot.

We have done our homework. We have sampled voters throughout the county to see what they have to say about a vote-by-mail initiative. Even the most adamant of voters who prefer to vote in person agreed that they would not be deterred from voting if voting at their local polls was eliminated, and many validated the benefits and effectiveness of a single voting system.

A senior voter from Bellevue said, "I'd prefer to vote in person; I haven't missed a vote in 45 years. But will that stop me from voting? Absolutely not."

A 30-year perfect voter from Kent said, "I like voting in person. I take my kids. We talk about the process and the candidates. I will miss voting in person, but we'll change. My kids and I will make it a conversation at the dinner table instead of at the ballot box."

A woman from Wallingford said, "I've been dragging my feet. I knew it was coming. I'll get with the program this year. Promise."

What is likely to happen when we switch to vote-by-mail?

Information from both Oregon and other counties' experience tells us that when everyone votes by mail, the voter turnout is higher, substantially so in lower profile elections. Our own local League of Women Voters predicts that voters are more informed in a vote-by-mail system.

We have heard from voters who go to the polls and find that there was something on the ballot they knew nothing about, a local government candidate, a judge, an initiative, or a local ballot measure. When voting by mail, these voters can refer to their voters' pamphlet, call a friend, or go online and search out the information and then complete their ballot when and where they choose to do it.

It will mean more efficient elections where the elections officials can concentrate on one election system, not two. Over time, the elections process becomes more cost-effective too, with resources focused on transparency, accountability and trackability.

Outside experts and citizens' panels reviewing prospective election improvements have all recommended adopting vote-by-mail.

Will there be people who still prefer to vote in person? Can we accommodate them?

Yes. And, yes.

Providing in-person voting options and places for voters to personally deliver their voted ballots remains important, even in a vote-by-mail environment.

The federal Help America Vote Act reforms are directed at making voting more private for blind and partially sighted voters. We talked to voters and advocate organizations in King County. Currently, blind and partially sighted voters must rely on friends and relatives to vote their preference. Traditionally, they vote by mail. The new disability access voting equipment will provide these and other voters with disabilities their rightful opportunity to cast an independent, secret ballot.

A blind, single woman reliant on friends to help her vote said, "There have been times when I voted for someone my friends thought was a bad choice. After I said I wanted my choice, my friend said, 'Oh, you don't want to do that, do you?' This is a friend, but I will always wonder how my vote was registered."

King County Elections believes that people with disabilities, including those who are blind and partially sighted should have the same privacy protections that sighted voters have. To ensure this, our vote-by-mail plan includes placement of regional voting centers throughout the county equipped with disability accessible voting equipment.

Additionally, there are people who love the experience of voting in person. We will try to accommodate them through ballot drop-off sites and regional vote centers.

On December 20, 2005, King County Executive Ron Sims announced his desire to adopt an all-mail voting system in King County. The Executive directed the Records, Elections and Licensing Services Division to prepare a preliminary report on moving the county to vote-by-mail elections with options for implementation in 2006 and in 2007.

A Core Planning Team was commissioned in January 2006 by Dean Logan, Director of Records, Elections and Licensing Services, to produce this report. The intent of this report is to provide the appropriate analysis and information to guide a decision on how to transition from the current dual voting system (polls and absentee) to an all-mail system in accordance with state law and within the scope of the defined vision and desired objective.

Background

Statewide Trends

Washington State law has historically provided voluntary options for voting by mail – originally for elderly voters and those with disabilities, then gradually expanding to include all voters. Today, voters have the option of requesting absentee ballots for individual elections or for all elections by registering as ongoing absentee voters. Since 1991, counties have had the option of conducting certain non-partisan primaries and special elections as entirely vote-by-mail elections.

Over the last decade, the number of voters self-selecting to vote by mail has grown steadily and consistently. By 2004, in most counties, the percentage of voters participating in elections who cast ballots by mail averaged above 60 percent in General Elections and more than 80 percent in primaries and special elections.

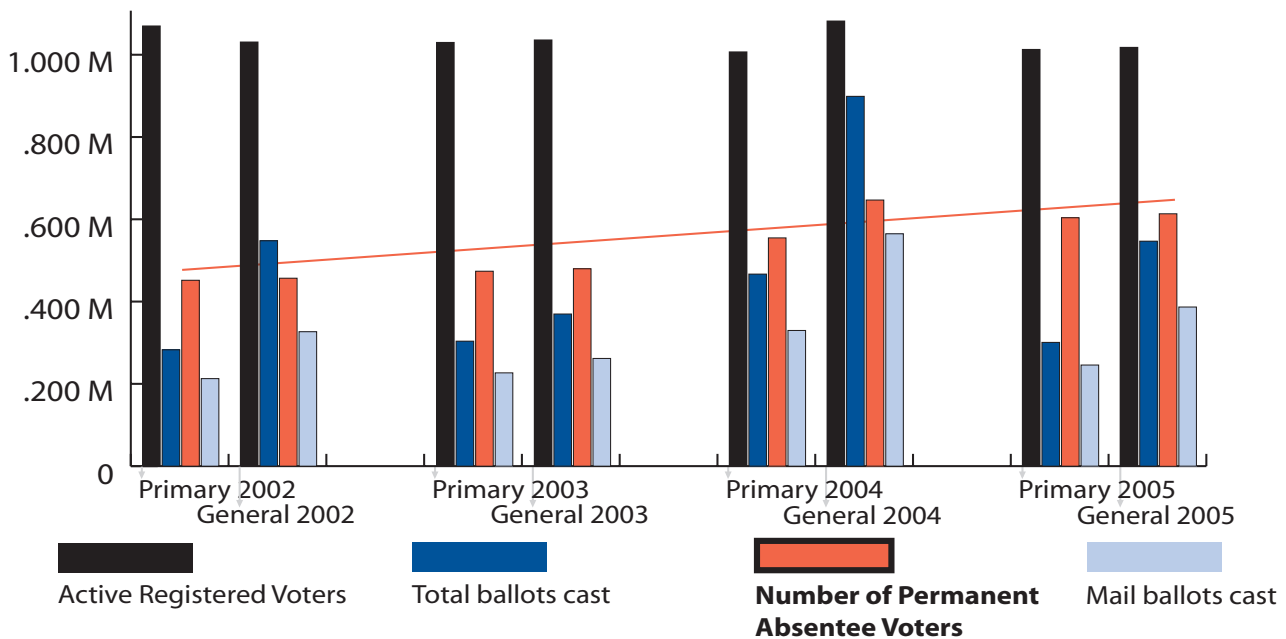
In 2005, the Washington State Legislature amended state election law to authorize counties a local option to conduct all elections by mail. Shortly thereafter, 29 of the state’s 39 counties adopted the local option in 2005 and four more have adopted ordinances to implement vote-by-mail systems in 2006.



Vote-by-mail is already prevalent in King County, is already favored by voters, provides for significant cost savings and stimulates higher turnout among voters.”

King County Independent Task Force on Elections,
Report and Recommendations to the King County Executive, July 27, 2005

In King County the voting trends have been similar. A record 81.73 percent of the ballots cast in the 2005 primary in King County were cast by mail. Even in the 2004 Presidential Election (the highest turnout election cycle), the percentage approached 63 percent. Nearly 60 percent of all King County registered voters are now registered as permanent absentee voters. That percentage is higher among new registrants. Yet, the current dual voting system requires 528 polling locations and close to 4,000 poll workers for a countywide election, plus a full scale mail ballot processing operation and facility. A disproportionate share of direct election costs are currently associated with the precinct and polling place based system, while an overwhelming majority of voters are casting ballots through the mail.



Added to the issue of costs for setting up polling places is the matter of adequately staffing them. Although the political parties do their best to provide persons capable of doing this work, the numbers they are able to provide are dwindling. The primary causes of this are the physical demands and the ever-increasing complexity of tasks to be performed. The amount of supplies and equipment necessary to set up a polling locating is staggering, yet polling place inspectors are expected to lift and transport multiple pieces of equipment and heavy supply bags multiple times between pick-up prior to the election and delivery on election night. This is daunting for the average poll worker who ranges in age from 60+ to mid- and late 70s.

Another factor is the growing complexity of procedures at the polls. Each year, law changes increase the required activities for poll sites. Although the issues addressed may be important to conducting secure elections, the reality of asking persons who participate in the work at the polls on average of twice a year to remember and be capable of completing the extensive list of procedures, is far from an ideal framework from which to operate. Multitudes of experienced workers tell us they simply cannot continue this work due to the excessive physical and mental strains.

Based on those trends, in 2005 King County Elections began considering the viability of adopting an all mail-voting system. The current dual voting system is costly, complex and inefficient based on the significant trend toward vote-by-mail. Adopting a vote-by-mail system will allow the county to focus resources and systems to gain efficiencies while limiting the dependency on human interaction and ballot handling.



The current dual voting system in King County is inefficient and expensive.”

The Election Center Operations Audit, October 25, 2005

While vote-by-mail is a tried and proven system in the majority of Washington counties and has been adopted statewide in Oregon, it is important to note that there is no comparable jurisdiction to King County, in the country, in terms of size and complexity of election operations, that conducts all elections by mail. For that reason, additional considerations and analysis must be considered when designing an implementation process. **Those considerations include:**

- voting system speed, capacity, and database size
- outgoing and incoming ballot processing systems
- adequate facilities to provide for transparency, security, and accountability
- regulatory limitations and requirements on ballot processing, dates of elections and time requirements for certifying election returns
- options for voters with disabilities and special needs to cast ballots independently
- voter outreach and education programs
- voter registration database integrity

The Core Planning Team established work groups, convened stakeholder roundtable meetings, and collected data in each of these areas to ensure they are appropriately considered and addressed in planning efforts that will continue as King County moves forward with adoption of an ordinance to conduct all elections by mail.

Weighing the Options

This is a summary of the results from the Core Planning Team's work on a proposal for a successful vote-by-mail system for King County.

Planning Approach

The Core Planning Team used a structured design process to produce a detailed plan to move King County to an all-mail ballot system. The planning process included significant feedback and input from stakeholders, subject matter experts, resource persons, and Elections staff. (Refer to the appendices for a list of participants). A brief overview of the process follows:

The Core Planning Team conducted a preliminary analysis in the following areas to provide context and background for the planning process:

- Critical issues that must be addressed to ensure successful implementation.
- Primary customers and stakeholders and their needs and requirements.
- Factors that will have a significant impact on the success of the plan.
- Strengths and weaknesses of the current system.
- Opportunities presented by the proposed system and potential risks that must be addressed.
- Data about the current and planned systems to determine what is known (or needs to be known) for effective planning.

Subgroups of the Core Planning Team conducted analysis in the following areas:

- Stakeholder input (concerns, ideas and recommendations).
- Trends in mail voting, system capacity, and the impact of moving to a vote-by-mail system.
- Potential technology solutions (including specific products and suppliers) and how each solution might address system requirements for King County.
- Facilities requirements for conducting vote-by-mail operations.
- Design and implementation of regional voting centers with improved accessibility.
- Voter education and outreach effort to support the change.
- Legislation and policies needed to support successful implementation.

The Core Planning Team specified a proposed design and analyzed the impact of implementing the plan in either of the two proposed timelines: fall 2006 or summer/fall 2007.

Following review by the Executive and the selection of an implementation date, the Core Planning Team will provide oversight for a series of work groups convened to focus on further detailed implementation activities.

Analysis of the Vote-by-Mail Election Environment

As part of its preliminary design work, the Core Planning Team analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the current and proposed systems – and both the opportunities and threats for successful implementation of a countywide vote-by-mail system. The analysis was gathered from within the Core Planning Team, a stakeholder roundtable, and facilitated staff input sessions.

Strengths

With a system already dealing with approximately 70 percent of the ballots by mail, the organization has subject matter experts, success, and many documented procedures for mail ballot processing. There is a mandate and support for the vote-by-mail plan in many arenas. This plan provides more clarity and establishes a single system that results in a less complex and ambiguous operating environment.

Weaknesses

There are some serious limitations in the current systems, facilities and resources when contemplating vote-by-mail, including key staff vacancies that will make the planning and implementation process more difficult. There is no “ideal” product or technical solution currently available. Elections is doing planning in a tight time frame for implementation while also addressing the need identified by division management to address organizational structure, continuing to accomplish the regular business of running elections, and the challenges of fatigue. The change is happening within a highly politicized environment, complicated by the potential for misinformation and a past history of problems.

Opportunities

This is a tremendous opportunity to be at the forefront of elections management by becoming a model system while building a more positive image and increasing voter participation. In going to a single system, the potential exists to yield a higher level of cost-effectiveness over time, consolidate the precinct system, reduce system complexity, dramatically simplify election administration, clean up the voter registration database, and adopt new and effective technologies for vote-by-mail. The planning process will include the design and justification for a facility that meets the requirements for new systems and processes. It provides the opportunity for staff and stakeholders to look at the system in a different way and adopt a new approach and attitude toward finding solutions.

Threats

There is a risk that political objections or resistance, public opposition, or negative perceptions may create barriers to making effective changes. If policymakers are unable to enact needed legislative (state or local) changes, it presents significant constraints on system design and operation. If expectations are not properly managed, there is the potential for over-promising on the benefits and under-delivering on results. If we do not have the time and resources to do it right, or if we fail to address the risks, there is a possibility that the plan will not bring about the right changes in organizational structure and operations. With dramatic system changes planned, there will be a strong need for effective technology and support. Staff will need a great deal of new training. Our system cannot fail to meet disability access and other federal and state requirements, and whatever actions we take must build on the momentum gained in the successful administration of the 2005 elections.

Critical Design Factors

The Core Planning Team developed their recommendations based, in part, on those factors considered critical to a successful plan.

Plan Requirements

The plan developed by the Core Planning Team must be comprehensive, realistic, and achievable. It has to demonstrate stakeholder engagement and add value for voters.

It needs to be detailed enough to be ready for immediate implementation after approval and should identify specific work groups that will be assigned to plan and implement sub-projects. At the same time, it must be flexible to respond to changes in public policy and the input received from voters and stakeholders.

The plan must consider a separate analysis for each of the proposed time frames and must clearly describe the relevant risks, benefits, costs, contingencies, and the team's recommendation about the preferred alternative.

The plan must achieve Executive and Council approval that leads to timely passage of the required enabling ordinance.

It must address current and projected policy impacts, meet accessibility requirements, and have a viable technology component.

Stakeholder Requirements

Voters want affirmation that their vote counted and to be assured of the integrity of the voting system. It is important that the system is easy to use and readily accessible to accommodate special-needs voters such as those with language barriers or disabilities.

Elected officials, candidates and political parties have special requirements for receiving election data quickly and in as useful a form as possible (results, returns, voter data, etc.). They expect accessibility, transparent processes, validated accuracy, and problem-free elections.

The media want immediate access to election results but also want to understand the process and the big picture, receiving the information they need to tell the election story.

Employees need to have confidence in the new system to create a sense of ownership, buy-in, and accountability. They are interested in receiving recognition, having stability in their employment, and a predictable work environment, as well as an understanding of any new organizational structure and change processes.

Oversight groups and public agencies must be assured that all policies are being adhered to and that all legal requirements are being met. King County Elections must be able to demonstrate how these are being met and address questions and concerns completely and accurately.

Other elections jurisdictions will be interested in the opportunity to benchmark their processes against those developed in King County. King County Elections must be prepared to share its knowledge about best practices and lessons learned in the process of moving to vote-by-mail.

Public jurisdictions within King County will want to know the impact that a new system will have on their practices and operations. Keeping them informed and inviting their input will be critical to our success.

Vendor/Supplier Issues

Equipment and software vendors will have a dramatic impact on the success of the system. For current suppliers, there is a need to fully understand the impact on existing contracts and to be aware of plans to integrate current technologies into the new system. For potential new suppliers, there is a need to validate their system capacities and the level of technical support that King County Elections expects to be available and provided. In selecting suppliers, King County Elections needs to maintain a competitive perspective on the market for vendor services and ensure that selected products or systems have long-term sustainability.

The United States Postal Service is a critical supplier in the vote-by-mail process. It will be important to engage in effective partnering and communication with this key supplier and to design our work processes to mesh with their systems. For transparency and accountability, it will be essential to have an effective system for tracking ballots in the mail system and to be able to use and access data to document the impacts of any problems.

Other King County agencies will be called upon to support the planning, design and implementation of the new system and Elections will need to be assured of their ability to deliver services to meet design requirements.

The elections workforce will need to undergo some significant changes to respond to future requirements for this system. It will be critical to recruit, train, and retain a workforce with the right set of skills and abilities to deal with substantial shifts in work methods. The plan will also have to include a process for dealing effectively with labor agreements to ensure adequate flexibility in implementation.

The system must accommodate a number of policy- or law-driven requirements, such as deadlines, election dates, certification dates, processing rules, and system certification requirements. Some of these may limit specific technology solutions until resolved.

Design Recommendations

After review of the collected data, success criteria, known factors, and risk/benefit analysis, the Core Planning Team proposed the following overall design features for a vote-by-mail system.

Mail Ballot Processing and Accountability

In general, the mail ballot system will remain largely similar to today's model with the exception of changes required to take advantage of new technologies and machines to meet projections for increased volume to provide greater accountability and enhanced ballot tracking. This will require additional training for staff and the need to redefine and alter processes. It will be important to take appropriate steps to manage ballot flow to reduce volume variations or implement a work system that can reasonably deal with the variations in a sustainable manner (such as shift work). The implementation of regional voting centers and ballot drop-off locations will affect the ability to transfer and count ballots in a timely manner, and it will be important to manage expectations about the nature and accuracy of election results that can be provided on Election Day.

Tabulation Technology: There are a limited number of vendors available to provide this function with high-speed scanners in a centralized environment. The team recommends selecting a vendor based on the criteria of proven capacity and scope of experience and the ability to test the system adequately before a primary or general election. In lieu of purchasing new machines, the option exists to leverage existing equipment and technology, although there are serious concerns about labor costs, capacity and inefficiency. The current regulatory limitations on tabulation activities also affect the viability of existing equipment. If new tabulation machines are implemented, the system will be inconsistent with the current Disability Accessible Voting Equipment project, which must be implemented in 2006 to be compliant with the federal Help America Vote Act and state law.

Ballot Tracking Technology: The most promising solution is an "end-to-end" provider of ballot mailing and tracking systems with automated signature verification. The latter option should be tracked to determine its capabilities within the current and proposed policies and laws.

Staffing Recommendations

Professionalize elections with greater use of permanent staff. The use of regional voting centers and changes in voting technologies could mean bringing more work "in house," with a potential increase in the number of permanent staff, although this will be offset by system efficiencies. As part of detailed planning, analyze the best mix of permanent and temporary staffing to meet the requirements of selected systems and work methods. Establish a concerted strategy for communications, training and education of current and new staff.

The elimination of polling places and poll workers as they are known today means that Elections will no longer be dependent upon thousands of temporary workers to accomplish an increasingly complex and labor-intensive body of work. As a cadre of workers, with whom our election systems have historically depended upon, we must recognize their past contributions and bring closure in a respectful and gracious manner. To accomplish this, the team recommends a "poll worker recognition and retirement party" to formalize the process and thank these dedicated public servants for their civic service. There will also need to be discussion and coordination with the political parties about their participation in the regional voting center model and expanded opportunities for official party observation and oversight.

Election Facilities

For either implementation date, the recommendation is to consolidate all mail ballot processing functions at the Temporary Elections Annex, while retaining the Election Equipment Distribution Center and Elections Administration (including Voter Services) in their current facilities. Additional

tenant improvements at the Temporary Elections Annex will be required to occupy additional square footage and redeploy space as needed.



We strongly recommend the consolidation of KCEO facilities into one location. We believe based on our early observations that this action will enable the KCEO to streamline operations by significantly improving the efficiency of election activities, improve management oversight, enhance communications, reduce the risk of errors, and hasten cultural development.”

Waldron & Company Initial Assessment Report, January 25, 2006

Because the Temporary Elections Annex is not a long-term option (and for significant operational and efficiency reasons), Elections still requires a centralized, consolidated facility that meets previously specified requirements. The final selection of a facility depends on which of the three following options becomes available when the move is finalized and will impact the long term plan for 2007 and beyond. In order of increasing amount of time required to establish a facility, the choices are to:

1. Locate an existing building that requires minimal tenant improvements
2. Locate an existing building that requires major improvements
3. Initiate new construction

Regional Vote Centers

Establish several fully staffed regional voting centers (RVC) with facilities distributed across the county according to user population and need. Use a defined set of criteria for selecting locations to avoid any perception of politically based decisions. These facilities are required to provide services equivalent to polling places and will need to include multiple accessible voting machines and political party oversight. The RVCs should also accommodate a mail ballot drop box, a real-time connection with the voter registration database, and access to electronic poll books. Each facility needs to provide physical access for persons with disabilities.

In addition to the RVCs, establish drop-off locations (including some that are “drive-up”) that are secure and monitored (but not staffed) in generally recognized public places, such as city halls, libraries and community centers.

Operate one or more “Vote Mobiles” – a traveling, fully equipped RVC. Start with one and evaluate its utility for improving voter access.

Voter Education and Outreach

Implement a focused and highly visible campaign to educate voters about the vote-by-mail system, with considerable attention to influencing voter behavior in ways that decrease voter errors in both registration and ballot processes.

As part of the outreach efforts, ensure that Elections meets the legal requirement for a formal 90 day notice to voters about the change and conducts targeted outreach to special populations and communities to maximize voter access and participation.

Legislative and Regulatory Changes

Planning efforts included identification of legislative and regulatory changes that would facilitate the transition to vote-by-mail. Each policy area was reviewed for impacts within the two proposed timeframes and an assessment of the risk factor if the change was not adopted. A high assessment indicates that lacking the identified policy change, vote-by-mail adoption in the given timeframe would have significant risk.

Legislative and Regulatory Changes

Risk H – Failure to adopt would put vote-by-mail implementation at a high risk.

Risk M – Failure to adopt would put vote-by-mail implementation at a medium/mid-level risk.

Risk L – Failure to adopt would put vote-by-mail implementation at a low risk.

ITEM	SOURCE	RISK LEVEL	STATUS
Allowing final processing of ballots prior to Election Day	Washington Administrative Code	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk M	Under consideration – Secretary of State
Authorization of automated signature verification	Revised Code of Washington	'06 not critical/Risk M '07 not critical/Risk M	Legislation pending. (HB 2479)
Moving the date of the primary	Revised Code of Washington	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk M	Legislation pending. Secretary of State, WACO and King County legislative priority (SB 6236)
Modifying the size of voting precincts	King County Code	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk M	Needs action. Referenced in Election Center Audit
Adopting vote-by-mail (local option)	King County Ordinance	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk M	Proposal will be formulated and submitted by the Executive
Modifying absentee and provisional ballot notice requirements	Revised Code of Washington	'06 critical/Risk M '07 critical/Risk M	Legislation pending (SB 6423, HB 2695)
Modifying election recount provisions	Revised Code of Washington	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk H	Legislation pending (SB 6422, HB 2696)
Ensuring equipment accessibility for voters with visual impairments	Revised Code of Washington	'06 critical/Risk H '07 critical/Risk M	Legislation pending (SB 6242, HB 2479)
Making technical changes to election laws	Revised Code of Washington	'06 not critical/Risk L '07 not critical/Risk L	Legislation pending (SB 6235, HB 2477)
Dates of Special Elections	Revised Code of Washington	'06 not critical/Risk L '07 not critical/Risk L	No current action pending
Requirements for return date/time of mail ballots	Revised Code of Washington	'06 not critical/Risk L '07 not critical/Risk L	No current action pending
Placement of Precinct Committee Officers on ballots	Revised Code of Washington	'06 not critical/Risk MH '07 not critical/Risk L	No current action pending

Summary of Team Analysis

The Core Planning Team analyzed each critical path design component to assess the overall likelihood of successful completion (viability) in each of the proposed time frames for implementation.

High – A “high” viability rating is an estimate by staff of the likelihood that what is indicated can or will occur with minimal risk of not occurring.

Medium – A “medium” viability rating is an estimate by staff of the likelihood that what is indicated may occur, though there is elevated risk and the possibility that a major dependency could prevent or impact the viability.

Low – A “low” viability rating is an estimate by staff of the likelihood that what is indicated may not occur. This could be for a variety of reasons including but not limited to time, resources, technology, policy decisions, etc.

Planning Area	2006 Viability	2007 Viability	Comments
Ballot Tabulation – Status Quo	Low	Medium	Lack of processing capacity requires multiple shifts and additional staffing in an untested model
Ballot Tabulation – High Speed	Not viable	Medium	Not possible to acquire and implement suitable equipment in 2006
Automated Signature Verification	Not viable	Medium	Not viable in 2006 because of legislation required to implement
Ballot Tracking	Low - Medium	Medium - High	This technology results in better efficiency if properly integrated into mail ballot system
Mail Ballot Facilities	Low - High	High	2006 viability varies according to availability of contiguous space for leasing in current facility
Staffing	Low	High	At current staffing levels, insufficient managers and regular staff to handle shift work or expansion of activities
Voter Education and Outreach	Medium	High	2006 viability is medium due to unknowns about technology and legislation
Laws and Policies	Low	High	2006 viability is low due to primary date and timing for council enabling legislation and funding
Regional Voting Centers	Medium	High	Difficult to implement RVCs that meet criteria in appropriate locations and numbers for 2006. Locations not viable if they lack a high- speed data connection.

Critical Path Timelines and Decision Points

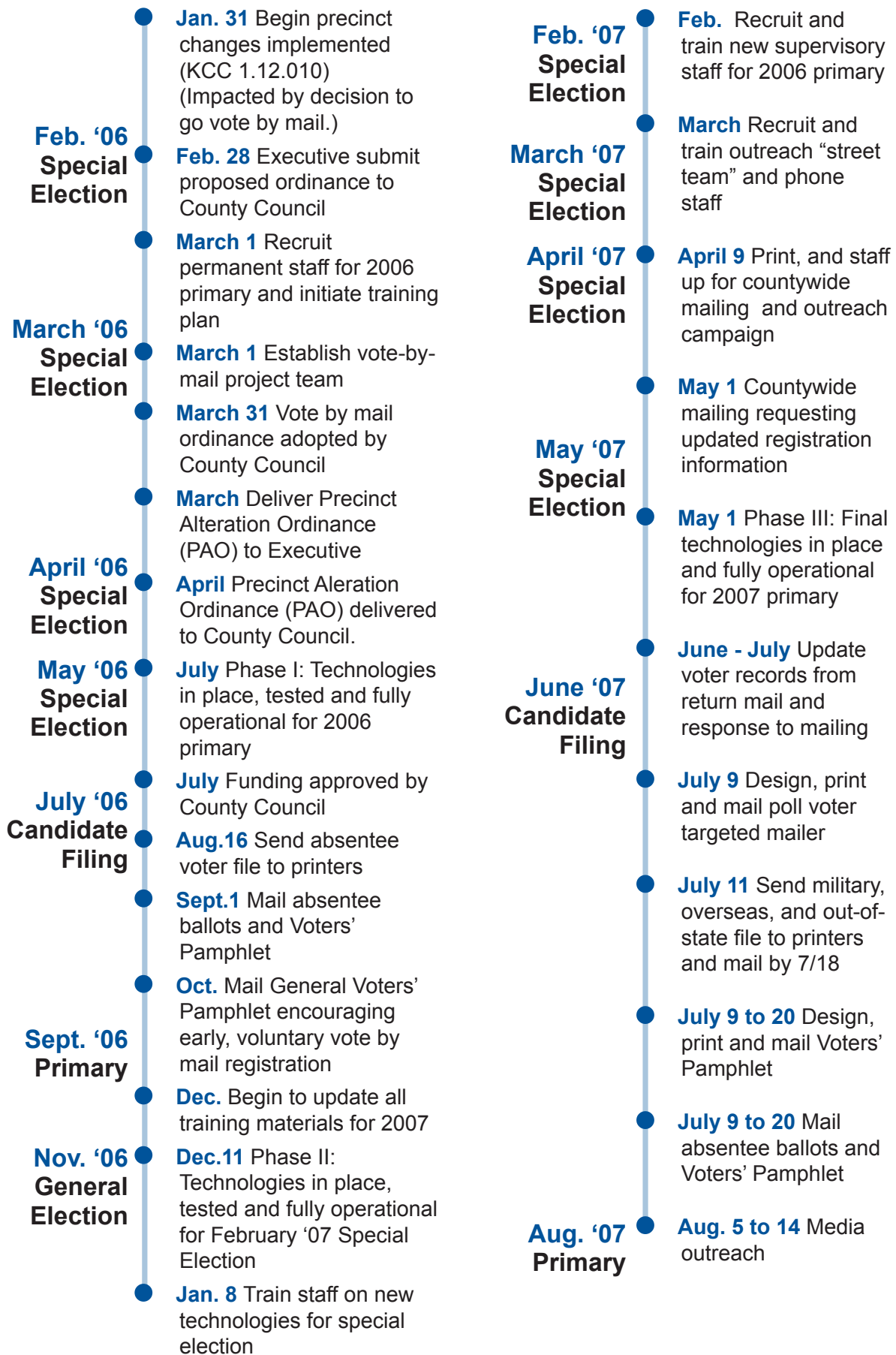
In implementing the vote-by-mail system countywide, the biggest concern (and greatest threat to success) is the potential for missing critical path deadlines in a large, complex, and highly visible public process. Though the average voter does not understand the many processes and complexities inherent in running the largest vote-by-mail system in the country, they will know without a doubt if something goes wrong in their individual case, or if the system is implemented in a way that increases the potential for error. We will not get a second chance to make a first impression about how well this was done.

Thoughtful discussion and consideration was dedicated to this area of planning by the Core Planning Team. Today's election process is subject to influences that can quickly alter the most well-planned, detail-intense schedule; therefore, providing for the possibility of unforeseen impacts and assessing the strength of each piece of the whole is essential. Each factor must be measured against the necessary efficiency to be gained, the feasibility of implementation in a shifting environment, and the benefits or limitations that might be realized for the voter and the county. The summary provided here serves as a critical tool to ensure confidence in the overall plan, protect the best interests of the county and the voters, and clarify, to the extent possible (imaginable), the challenges to effective implementation of the plan.

Note: The following timelines and related deadlines are based on a preliminary analysis of data and potential legislative changes.

- **Feb. '06 Special Election**
 - **Jan. 31** Begin precinct changes implemented (KCC 1.12.010) (Impacted by decision to go vote by mail.)
- **March '06 Special Election**
 - **Feb. 1** Recruit and train new supervisory staff for 2006 primary
- **April '06 Special Election**
 - **Feb. 1** Executive submit proposed vote by mail ordinance to County Council
 - **March 1** Initiate training plan for 2006 primary and recruit permanent staff
- **May '06 Special Election**
 - **March 1** Vote by mail ordinance adopted by County Council
 - **March 1** Establish vote-by-mail project team
 - **April 1** Funding for voter outreach and education approved by County Council
 - **May 1** Deliver Precinct Alteration Ordinance (PAO) to Executive
 - **May 1** Update and revamp all training documents for primary
 - **May 1** Precinct Alteration Ordinance (PAO) delivered to County Council.
 - **May 8** Design, print, and staff up for June countywide mailing and outreach campaign
 - **June 1** Countywide mailing requesting updated registration information and VBM notice
- **July '06 Candidate Filing**
 - **July 1 to Aug. 1** Update voter records
 - **June 12** All technologies must be in place, tested and fully operational
 - **June 19 to Aug. 11** Train staff on new technologies
 - **Aug. 9** Send military, overseas, and out-of-state file to printers and mail 8/16
 - **Aug. 7–18** Design, print and mail poll voter targeted mailer
 - **Aug. 23** Design, print and mail Voters' Pamphlet
- **Sept. '06 Primary**
 - **Sept. 1** Send absentee voter file to printers
 - **Sept. 4–19** Mail absentee ballots and Voters' Pamphlet

Critical Path Timelines and Decision Points 2006/2007



Preliminary Financial Assessment

On the fiscal front, the timing of a policy decision to convert King County to all vote-by-mail within the next two years is a prudent decision but not without financial investment and potential risk. If it is to be done right, it will require substantial investment in technology, change management, space, and people.

It is also important to understand that vote-by-mail will not immediately reduce costs. Over-promising on the value of vote-by-mail as a lower-cost methodology creates expectations that will be difficult to achieve. Fiscal analysis should, instead, focus on the cost-effectiveness of vote-by-mail and the opportunity to avoid maintaining a system used to cast an ever decreasing number of ballots.

Cost is relative. All things being equal, and they are not, going vote-by-mail would benefit King County by helping to minimize the impact of other growing costs. In that sense, a vote-by-mail system represents a cost-avoidance benefit more so than a cost reduction. It is fair to say that vote-by-mail will, for example, avoid the need to pay \$500,000 in election official (poll worker) wages and paying \$65,000 in polling place rent. Additional, less-significant savings would come from not having to manage poll-based voting. While the sum of these reductions is sizable, it does not take into account the additional upfront and ongoing costs associated with administering vote-by-mail on a countywide basis in a jurisdiction the size of King County.

In a vote-by-mail system, more ballots will be printed, processed and mailed to voters. More ballots will be returned from voters requiring increased resources for incoming processing, tracking, and tabulating. The added cost of these activities is marginally greater than the savings generated by eliminating poll voting but represents an increased cost benefit when considering reduced opportunity for errors, increased accountability and greater security. Historically, and purely on a financial basis, the dual system (poll and absentee) was more economical despite the growing cost of poll-based voting for a dwindling number of voters. However, with essentially 600,000 regular ongoing absentee voters, King County is now at or near the break even point with an entirely vote-by-mail system. In other words, the savings generated by not voting at the polls is nearly enough to cover the costs associated with increased vote-by-mail activity.

While the cost of poll workers and polling place rent would likely be traded for increased staffing, printing, mailing, processing, etc., new costs would initially increase overall expenditures. Regional voting centers (RVC) and drop-off locations have not previously been considered in cost comparisons or existing budgets. The impacts of these costs are largely related to the quantity and staffing/service model selected for each. Regional voting centers would likely range from \$18 to \$27 thousand per site, per election. To a significant degree, RVCs are tied to accessibility, and they are essential to providing equal access to voting for people with disabilities. Drop-off locations would be significantly less costly to support; however, there is no legal requirement for their existence. Security would be a new challenge, and in the end, may cost more for the county per ballot dropped off than the cost of the stamp saved by the individual voter.

With that said, as mentioned above, things are not equal. Nearly a decade ago, King County made a decision to invest in polling place equipment and a decentralized ballot counting environment. Even the equipment now being used to process more than half a million voted absentee ballots is comprised of a concentrated number of polling place counters with automatic ballot feeders to assist in the movement of the ballot across the scanning equipment. The growing number of absentee voters in King County and the increased requirements for processing speed mean that King County is in the market for a high-speed, central count tabulation system with the capacity to process more ballots than any other elections jurisdiction in the United States. Frankly, King County is in

the market for this equipment regardless of a decision to go vote-by-mail. Thus, the cost of future elections must take into account a new investment in high-speed equipment not likely to lend itself to an expectation of reducing cost generally.

To make the transition to vote-by-mail, existing tabulation equipment is ill-equipped to handle the volume of ballots anticipated in an even-numbered, nonpresidential election year (2006). High-speed central count equipment is effectively not available in Washington State with the county's current vendor, and alternatives for more immediate solutions leave little hope and create greater risk if pursued without appropriate due diligence in the current year. In 2007, the options become much more in the county's favor. While the list of existing vendors remains limited, the option to leverage past investments with newly emerging technology presents exciting opportunities. An initial assessment of costs associated with implementing high-speed central count equipment with the existing tabulation software indicates an estimated cost of \$1 million.

While the technology market has been slow to respond to the increasing demands for high tech solutions, more recent developments are beginning to emerge. As greater accountability and improved efficiency is demanded of election administrators, equipment built for other purposes like mail houses and inventory warehousing is being leveraged to make professional tools available to the elections industry. Mail handling equipment with precision insertion capability, redundant quality control and multiple audit tools is arriving in the market place. The market remains limited, but the commitment by large manufacturers to cautiously enter into the elections industry is creating opportunities. While the estimates vary widely, equipment in the range of \$1 to \$3 million is available and would facilitate efforts to increase accountability both on the outgoing and incoming side of mail ballot processing.

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The cost of elections is difficult to near impossible to compare from one election to the other, but it is clear that the direct costs associated with increased accountability and quality involves far more time and resources than the alternative. In 2005, King County revamped and documented nearly every task involved in administering an election. These new practices were implemented particularly in the September 2005 primary and refined again in the November 2005 General Election. The effort resulted in arguably the greatest level of accountability ever achieved in King County and concurrent audits reflected these successes. But slowing down the process to better track and account for production activities required adding significantly more staff, which drove the need for more space, and the need for more security and equipment. Add to these changes the impact of legislative mandates both locally and at the state level and the costs of security, supplies, and labor have all increased. The cost of many of these is still yet to be fully appreciated, but in the fall of 2005 the cost of staffing countywide elections was nearly double the amount budgeted. Adding several hundred thousand more ballots in a vote-by-mail election will increase staffing needs and space requirements above that experienced in 2005. The estimated increase in cost per election for staffing in a countywide election is \$200 to \$300 thousand.

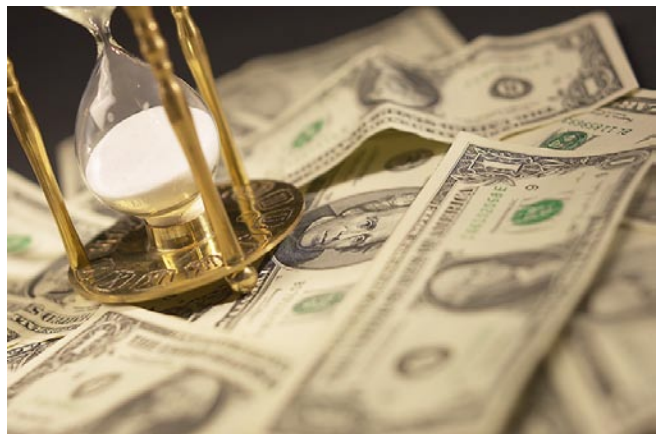
Space is also a major issue and an unavoidable and significant increase in cost. Independent of the decision to go vote-by-mail, King County requires more space than is currently budgeted. The county is currently in the active stages of preparing to create a long-term space solution for a consolidated elections facility. In the interim, space has been secured in a temporary facility to meet immediate needs with sufficient space available on a short-term basis to support expanding for purposes of administering a countywide vote-by-mail election. Unfortunately, the additional space is more readily available in the spring of 2007 than it is at any time in 2006. Regardless of short-term or long-term space, the cost of space sufficient to administer elections in King County, under status quo or a vote-by-mail system, will add an estimated \$1 million to annual operating costs.

The last time King County invested significantly in vote tabulation equipment was in 1998, with the purchase of the ballot tabulation equipment and software in place today. In 2006, with the help of federally appropriated and state-administered grant resources, King County is investing in disability accessible voting equipment. This equipment is required by state and federal law to be implemented in 2006, so doing so cannot be delayed nor avoided. While the cost of other much-needed equipment is significant, the transition to vote-by-mail in the next year or two does present favorable timing and reasonable chances to receive additional grant resources to facilitate implementation of systems not currently in place.

The need for investment in elections equipment to some degree is independent of the decision to go all vote-by-mail. The reality is, the equipment is needed now, regardless of the policy decision. Unfortunately, in 2006 the options are limited and the alternatives are not favorable. Since the county's current vendor does not have a high-speed tabulation product certified in Washington State (it is scheduled to commence the federal certification process in early 2006), procuring one would require much more than appropriating the resources for acquisition.

In 2007, the options available become more favorable. Even if the procurement process was truncated, replacing the tabulation equipment with a new vendor product would have significant impacts to consider. For example, a new system would jeopardize the integrated benefits of the recently acquired election management and voter registration system and the disability access voting equipment project. A new tabulation system would require a new ballot design and ordering system. Given the complexity and volume of unique ballot styles in King County (over 5,000 in certain countywide elections), the capacity of any other alternative option is unproven. A new tabulation system would require finding a new ballot printing and processing vendor, in the local area, with the capacity and experience to serve King County.

Moving to vote by mail is an essential charge that will facilitate longer term efficiency and improved cost benefit. While contemplating the policy decision to go all vote by mail, it is important to distinguish that voting by mail will benefit King County in many ways, and it will help avoid certain increasing costs associated with supporting a polling place-based system; but will not immediately reduce the cost of elections overall nor result in a noticeable cost savings particularly to the taxpayer and/or the jurisdictions that pay the cost of elections.



Recommendations

How and When?



We act proactively by planning ahead and avoiding unnecessary crisis management.”

*King County Elections Guiding Principles (excerpt),
adopted by staff May 2004*

To make the mail ballot system viable in 2006, King County Elections would have to use existing vendors, technology and processes and adapt them to the increased volume. While the Core Planning Team concluded that this could be accomplished, an accelerated implementation would fall significantly short of meeting the defined objective. It would likely interfere with being able to design, specify and implement the optimum mix of vendors, technologies and processes with new, efficient, and tested methods in 2007 as well.

King County Elections has the opportunity to be a nationwide model for elections management. We cannot afford a failure at this point in the improvement process for this organization. There are serious concerns that integration of the various planning areas will suffer by rushing to get it done in 2006.

In particular, the areas of concern are:

- Necessary changes in legislation and policies are still in process with outcomes that are uncertain
- There are a number of unknown factors that will influence the success of implementation in 2006.
- The timeframes for enacting appropriate enabling legislation, obtaining funding and acquiring the necessary equipment and locations are extremely tight.
- The existing technologies are varied, with some still in development and others not tested for an election of this scope. It will be difficult to specify and implement the necessary mix of vendors, equipment and technologies in an integrated approach required for this model.

External reviews strongly recommend that King County Elections ensure the use of good planning practices. A rush to implement the vote-by-mail system with too many outstanding known risk factors is contrary to these recommendations.



Develop a strategic business plan – King County should stop making important business decisions regarding operations of the Elections Section without adopting a comprehensive strategic plan...”

King County Independent Task Force on Elections, Report and Recommendations to the King County Executive, July 27, 2005

Stakeholders paid particular attention to what King County Elections has experienced in the past two years and emphasized issues of public perception. There was strong feeling among the sample stakeholder group that a rush to vote-by-mail, without adequate public vetting and organizational readiness, would not be met with confidence.

Alternatively, an implementation process resulting in a fully integrated vote-by-mail system by the 2007 primary is not only viable but also allows King County to develop a model implementation process that maximizes the efficiencies and accountability that are driving the move to vote-by-mail. Additionally, an extended, phased-in implementation plan allows for greater public engagement and interaction.

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The County Council should consider establishing a target date in early 2007 to allow sufficient time for the development and preparation of the study, as well as executive, legislative and public review of the study, prior to making a decision on a vote-by-mail policy.”

The Election Center Operations Audit, October 2005

What happens in King County has a significant impact on the rest of Washington State as well as regionally and nationally, so it is critical to have a successful system implemented with due diligence and caution. Consistent with our vision statement, it is equally important for voters to feel a sense of empowerment and increased accountability in any newly adopted system.

Our recommendation is to take the momentum achieved through process and organizational improvements demonstrated during the 2005 election cycle and apply them to an implementation plan that establishes an all-mail voting system in King County beginning with the primary of 2007. Implementation should begin immediately with adoption of a county ordinance within the first quarter of 2006. In the interim, active efforts to promote voting by mail should continue.

Value Added

In adopting an all-mail voting system for King County, it will be important to identify and promote the value-added nature of such a system for the voter. Feedback from voters in focus groups indicates that voters' confidence in the elections process as we move into the future will be measured by their ability to track their vote and to validate that their ballot has been received and counted.

Outreach and education efforts should focus on voter benefits in a vote-by-mail system with regional voting centers. These include a longer, more flexible voting period where the voter determines when and where to complete their ballot, where multiple options are available for returning voted ballots, where resources are available to provide information about ballot measures and candidates, and where election results are timely, accurate and accountable.

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Ensure that the voting process has as few barriers as possible – making voters aware of all of their options, including absentee voting.”

King County Citizens' Election Oversight Committee Report, May 2004

Public engagement throughout the implementation timeframe should be used to identify voter concerns and system vulnerabilities. To the extent possible, these issues should be addressed by final implementation.

The integrity of our voter registration rolls should be improved through the vote-by-mail system. All available services and systems for updating voter addresses, processing returned mail, and tracking forwarding orders should be incorporated into list maintenance activities to ensure the highest level of integrity possible.

Doing it Right



This is not a process we want to rush. We need a solid implementation plan that addresses the concerns of voters and election stakeholders. I want to be out front on this now so the state legislature, the county council, and the elections office have adequate time to respond in a manner that ensures a successful transition to vote-by-mail.”

Ron Sims, King County Executive, December 20, 2005

King County Elections has a unique opportunity to set the standard for implementing vote-by-mail in large, urban electoral jurisdictions across the country. Regionally, there will be great interest in how our system develops and achieves the established objectives. Already, like-sized jurisdictions in California are tracking our process and success.

A comprehensive implementation process that approaches the vote-by-mail model from a whole systems approach is recommended. This includes analysis of voter behavior, technology, mail processing and tracking systems, voter outreach and education, and the regulatory environment.

The implementation plan should be administered as a project using commonly accepted principles of project management with key deliverables, timelines, and measurements. Changes and developments should be phased in throughout the implementation timeframe to allow for troubleshooting, evaluation and adjustment, with final integration at the point of least risk and disruption.

Recommendations made in reports on external oversight activities in 2005 should be incorporated into the implementation process to demonstrate continuous improvement and organizational development.



...implementing the Consensus Recommendations will require that King County Officials and Elections Office personnel work simultaneously in the areas of public policy, organizational effectiveness, and elections operations. The Waldron Group believes King County should make it a top priority to successfully implement these recommendations, as they will have a profound and lasting impact on the King County Elections Office.”

Waldron & Company Initial Assessment Report, January 25, 2006

Parallel to the implementation project, the current election environment must remain stable. Public confidence and voter acceptance of the phased approach will be dependent upon the reliability and accountability of elections administered as the new system is developed and adopted. Adequate resources must be allotted to ensure that both current operations and the implementation project are able to achieve success.

Ensuring Excellence

To best evaluate the impact on voters and the elections process of conducting vote-by-mail elections, we recommend the Elections Section collaborate with the academic community to engage in qualitative and quantitative analysis. As previously documented, when King County moves to conducting all vote-by-mail elections, it will be the largest jurisdiction in the nation to do so. This change is of such significance that a serious academic study is warranted.

A collaborative approach with a respected academic institution would be mutually beneficial. King County would benefit from the analysis of the change and of voter response to it. The academic community would benefit from access to data and subject matter experts to conduct quantitative analysis that is desired by other jurisdictions interested in the vote-by-mail system.

Beginning a process of examination, study and data collection as King County moves to a vote-by-mail system is advantageous as it would allow for the examination of the process of change. This information could then be used to perfect the model used for changing to a vote-by-mail system and benefit other jurisdictions. Most importantly, the process would provide information on how King County can improve its system interactions and functions to minimize or eliminate any negative impacts on voters or the election process.

Several possible funding sources could be explored to support this effort. A grant application for funding through the Help America Vote Act could be submitted to the Office of the Secretary of State. National Science Foundation funding could be sought in addition to numerous foundations and endowments that award funds for social scientific study. Further, as a result of the events of the 2000 Presidential Election and the increased national focus on the administration of elections, several efforts and organizations have already been funded to study the election process that may want to undertake this effort. Schools with national recognition such as graduate schools of public administration may want to participate in the project as a public policy case study.

As the officials responsible for conducting fair and free elections, we must have an understanding of how our administrative practices impact the electorate. An academic study can help us with this understanding as we commence the single most significant change to the process in our time.

Next Steps

The work of the Core Planning Team should continue, with this body providing oversight and direction of the implementation project. A project team needs to be established to carry out the implementation plan. We recommend this team be staffed through a combination of assigned elections subject matter experts from within the current organizational structure of King County Elections and a contracted consultant team with expertise in organizational change, project management, and public relations. The project team will be responsible for implementation of vote-by-mail along with the recommendations of the various external review and oversight reports issued in 2005 and 2006. An active voter outreach and education plan should begin promoting vote-by-mail among voter groups and elections jurisdictions. Where feasible, serious consideration should be given to conducting the remaining 2006 special elections as all vote-by-mail elections. Outreach to poll voters with information about mail-in voting and applications for ongoing absentee status should precede the September primary and November General Election.

We need to continue outreach and collaboration with the disability community to ensure that plans and processes that are developed build upon the accessibility work completed by the existing project on implementing disability accessible voting equipment. If actively engaged, the disability community can become an important partner in championing vote-by-mail.

Voter registration list maintenance activities should be continuous, with an emphasis on getting updated addresses and voter signatures. King County Elections staff should remain actively involved in the continued refinement and ongoing implementation of the statewide voter registration database.

Automated mail processing, sorting and tracking systems should be implemented on time for the 2006 primary and General Election so that they are fully integrated into the mail ballot processing sequence and volume-tested before full countywide vote-by-mail implementation takes place in 2007.

Immediate Actions

February 2006

- Executive transmits to the County Council a proposed ordinance to conduct all King County elections by mail
- Records, Elections and Licensing Services establishes a Vote-by-Mail Project Team

March 2006

- Vote-by-Mail Project Team is fully staffed
- Vote-by-Mail Project Team submits final Implementation Plan for adoption
- Vote-by-Mail Project Team submits full financial plan to the Executive
- County Council adopts ordinance to conduct all King County elections by mail

Conclusion



“Our success in overcoming the challenges of the past and those ahead lies in seizing the opportunity that comes from the intense scrutiny and analysis that we endured in 2004. Recognizing what must be done, and staying on a steady course of improvement and accountability will result in a process and system that is trusted and respected.”

*2004 Elections Report to King County Executive Ron Sims,
February 2005*

Those were the concluding words in our report on the 2004 Elections and they are appropriate as we embrace the next phase of elections reform in King County: adopting an all-mail voting system. This is an opportunity to establish a single, common voting system, to reduce the complexity of elections administration, to enhance the transparency and accountability of our voting processes, to increase voter participation, and to make elections more cost-effective over the course of time.

In doing so, King County Elections is committed to working in partnership with voters, elected officials, and other stakeholders in an implementation process that is open, inclusive and responsive to the electorate and that fosters the highest level of public trust and confidence.

There are many steps between now and the day when everyone is mailed a ballot as a matter of course. This change is doable, needed, and a giant step toward consistent elections procedures statewide – a factor continually requested by our voters.

We are on the road to all-mail balloting now. Let's emphasize voluntary sign-ups of new vote-by-mail voters this year. Let's educate voters so they anticipate and understand the change. Let's give them more incentives to track their votes through technology advances. Let's continue the good work we are doing in making King County Elections more accountable, more trackable, more efficient, more accessible, more consistent, and less complex.

The voters continue to set high standards for us, and we will not let them down.

We believe that the operational improvements, the critical staffing additions, and the process of continual examination of our strengths and weaknesses will provide the foundation for making the opportunities listed above a reality for King County Elections.

