

Actionable Options and Ideas

Increasing Voter Turnout in the Kenai Peninsula Borough

Voter Turnout Working Group

TO: Brent Johnson, Assembly President
Assembly Members

FROM: Voter Turnout Working Group

DATE: March 19, 2024

RE: Prioritized List of Actionable Recommendations

On August 1, 2023, the Borough Assembly enacted Resolution 2023-053 forming the Voter Turnout Working Group. The working group's scope of work was to explore actionable options and ideas to present to the Assembly that are aimed at increasing awareness, participation, and voting in local elections, including but not limited to changing the Borough election day to align with the State of Alaska.

The Voter Turnout Working Group was tasked to present a list of prioritized actionable recommendations to the Borough Assembly no later than the first meeting in March 2024.

The working group held 6 meetings. Below is the working group's prioritized list for the Assembly's consideration.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 1..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Survey the borough residents** – Conduct a survey with borough residents and ask if they vote, and if not, why. This would allow residents to provide their thoughts and ideas on how to increase voter turnout.

It was suggested to hire a contractor to conduct a thorough survey that would include phone and door-to-door services, peer-to-peer text services and email follow-up. Costs for these services would need to be included in the election operating budgets.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 2..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Public Outreach / Education Campaign** – This concept would have several possible components that would provide different ways to inform residents when local elections are held and provide residents education of the election process.

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Contract service costs should be included in the election operating budgets. Ideas for public outreach and education campaigns include the following:

- Collaborate with local chambers of commerce and their membership to assist with getting the word out to residents.
- Hold mock elections at the schools to help educate up and coming voters on the election process and potentially provide for discussions at home.
- Contract a professional marketing firm to create and present education materials to the voters on the election process, such as “The life of a ballot”, “Filing for Office”, etc. Suggest adding marketing, promotion and contract service costs in the election operating budgets.
- Provide easier instructions and information on election materials. Include pictures and/or diagrams with processes and instructions.
- Ensure voters are aware of the different ways to cast a ballot (absentee in-person, absentee by-mail and special needs voting)
- Provide robo-alerts/calls or SMS messaging with the status of voted absentee ballots.
- Create a mobile app to keep residents informed of the status of election processes.
- Provide pre-recorded video clips of the canvassing process.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 3..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Promotion** – The working group felt strongly that there is a need to promote local elections and suggested the marketing, promotion and contract service costs be included in the election operating budgets. Potential promotional items included the following:

- Joint “Vote Local” campaign with the borough and cities
- “I Voted” sticker contest
- Ads on Local Radio stations, Spotify, Pandora and similar platforms
- Announcements on Reader Boards throughout the Community
- Advertisements in municipal publications
- Display banners, balloons, and swag
- Contract Marketing Services for Promotion

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RECOMMENDATION NO. 4..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Offer Early Voting prior to the election** – The State of Alaska offers early voting at some of their absentee in person polling locations. Early voting allows voters to sign the register and run their voted ballot through a tabulator just like they would on election day. Those ballots are included in vote tallies on the day of the election, whereas absentee ballots are counted on the day the election is canvassed. Early voting would require a change to borough and city codes (and home-rule charters). Software costs would need to be included in the election operating budgets to assist with marking the precinct registers of who voted early.

This option would offer early voting in conjunction with absentee in person voting and would eliminate the paperwork involved with absentee in person. However, absentee in person would still remain part of the process as early voting would conclude several days prior to the election so precinct registers could be updated with those who voted early.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 5..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Develop partnerships with businesses in the community** – It was suggested that local businesses could offer 10% discount or perhaps a free cup of coffee when they presented their “I voted” sticker.

Mr. Steinhage informed the working group that more research would be needed to determine if this item would be the proper use of public funds. It was shared that a business in Homer and Seldovia offers a free cup of coffee when voters present their “I voted” sticker. These business offer this on their own with no prompting from the city.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 6..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Email Distribution of Ballots** – Electronic transmission of absentee ballots is currently allowed in both borough and city codes. Electronic transmission includes fax and email. This process allows election officials to deliver an absentee ballot to the voter by email. The City of Homer accepts voted ballots by return email, while others deliver absentee ballots by email but require voted ballots to be returned by fax or mail.

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Other cities and the borough could consider accepting voted ballots by email. There were concerns about having voter's personal information on email servers that could not be removed. Personal information and identifiers are located on a voter information page and affidavit that is filled out by the voter and returned with the voted ballot.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 7..... Passed: Unanimous

- **Change statute language from "Special Needs" to "Additional Needs"** – State Statute defines "Special Needs Voting" as a qualified voter with a disability who, because of that disability, if unable to go to a polling place to vote may vote a special needs ballot. A personal representative may come to a polling location, complete the required paperwork and pick up a ballot for the voter.

The personal representative then delivers the ballot to the voter. The voter votes the ballot, seals it in the envelope provided and returns the voted ballot to the polls for the voter.

The working group discussed that some voters may not identify with the name of this ballot type and would like it changed to "Additional Needs". It was also suggested to offer this ballot type to anyone who needed a ballot delivered for any reason. This would require a change to state statute and both borough and city codes.

The following items were discussed by the working group but were not included with the prioritized recommendations:

MOTION: INCLUDE WITH RECOMMENDED ITEMS..... Failed: 0 Yes, 10 No, 4 Absent

- **Change the candidate filing period** – The candidate filing period is currently held August 1 through August 15 for both borough and city candidates (except for Kachemak City).

Moving the candidate filing period to July would allow election officials to receive ballots from the printer sooner so absentee ballots and other voting material could be mailed to the applicant not later than 45 days before the election. This would help accommodate military and overseas voters.

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The group discussed some of the downsides to this option, such as July being a busy month for residents with the fishing season. Any ballot measures would need to be ready sooner which would back up the dates for assembly and councils to evaluate and pass items to be placed on the ballot.

MOTION: INCLUDE WITH RECOMMENDED ITEMS... Failed: 2 Yes, 7 No, 1 Abstained, 4 Absent

- **Align Local Election Day with the State of Alaska's Election Day** – This option would change the local election day from the first Tuesday in October to the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. This would require a change to borough code, and if the cities decided to change their election date as well, a change to city code would be required, and in the case of certain home-rule municipalities voter approved amendments to the municipal charter would be required.

Concerns from the clerks regarding this item included the following:

- 1) Many of the polling locations are not large enough to accommodate multiple election boards (one for state and one for local).
- 2) The majority of election workers currently work both the state and local elections. If both the local and state elections were held on the same date, finding enough election workers to work the election would be challenging. The borough and cities cannot share election workers with the state.
- 3) During even number years, when both the local and state elections are occurring, the lines at polling sites may be long and may actually deter voters from waiting their turn to vote.
- 4) It would be a challenge for voters to be adequately informed with each election's candidates and ballot measures. The dominance of state elections may overshadow local elections and local issues.

The group also reviewed recent voter turnout information from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough that changed their election day to the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and noticed that while voter turnout increased during state election years (even numbered years), election turnout in odd numbered years was low, similar to before the date change.

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In regard to combined municipal and state elections, Alaska Administrative Code (6 AAC 27.175) provides that municipalities may request the state election director conduct a special election on behalf of the municipality. The request must be submitted 150-days prior to the state election.

MOTION: REMOVE ALL TOPICS LISTED BELOW FROM RECOMMENDED ITEMS

.....Passed: 9 Yes, 1 No, 4 Absent

- **Changing the Election Day to Saturday** – This idea would change the local election day from the first Tuesday in October to the second Saturday in October. This would require a change to borough code, if the cities decided to change their election date as well, a change to city code would be required, and in the case of certain home rule municipalities voter approved amendments to the municipal charter would be required.

Instead of holding the local election on a weekday, during the work week, a Saturday election day might improve voter turnout. It was discussed that this concept would have a significant fiscal impact on election budgets.

Further, it was discussed that both the state and the borough used to have Absentee in Person voting offices open on weekends; however, that practice ceased due to lack of participation from the voters.

- **Combine Borough & City Ballots** – This concept would eliminate the cities and borough having separate ballots. All ballot contests and measures would be on one ballot. This would require a change to borough code and city code (and home-rule city charters).

It was suggested that this may eliminate voter confusion. However, there were concerns about how the cities and borough canvassing process would be conducted without having the borough canvass for everyone. It was stated that the cities would lose local control of their elections.

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- **Vote By Mail** – This option would implement a vote by mail election where every registered voter in the borough would receive their ballot in the mail. Absentee in-person polling locations would be open to voters per usual.

This item was discussed by the working group. The working group believed this matter was outside the scope of work as provided by KPB Resolution 2023-053, however, the group supports vote by mail.

The working group recognized that the “vote by mail” topic was discussed and recommended by the Election Stakeholders Group in 2019. In the 2020 election, the borough voters indicated they were not in favor of by-mail elections and repealed Ordinance 2020-24 by 59.76%. The working group noted that the Borough has vote by mail precincts currently in place and felt that vote by mail was a viable option to increase voter turnout, as demonstrated by the Municipality of Anchorage and locations in other states, even though the prior actions had taken place.