

To: Kenai Peninsula Borough Mayor and Assembly
From: Susan Smalley, 105 Linwood Lane, Kenai, AK 99611
Re: 2014-20
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Agenda Item N.I.B
Committee PEP
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My first election ballot was cast in Napakiak, Alaska in 1970. Nixon was president and Bill Egan was the Governor. Every eligible person in the village voted in every election.

I would miss traditional voting, even at the local level. I love the striped election booths. I'm proud that Alaska has voter machines that give us quick tallies and a paper trail. I would miss getting the sticker to wear. It's a civic ritual to me, a social activity, a rite of the late summer and fall.

I've been an election official, at the polls, for most elections for about thirty years. I helped hand count 17 ballot issues back when we were building new schools. I don't think I've missed voting in an election and I've never voted by mail or absentee.

I have lamented the lack of voter turnout as you all have. October 2, 2012 is just one example. The participation was pitiful around the entire borough, with the District that includes K-Beach coming in with a low of 6.1%.

We do need to increase voter participation. And maybe vote-by-mail can help us with that. Not all of us are "civic ritual" voters. I hear younger folks talking about what I would term "convenience voting." It doesn't mean that they don't care about voting, it might mean that they don't feel a need to go to some place and do traditional voting. For them, it's a vote, not a social activity. Make it efficient and fast and don't require them to find "the place." Lots of countries choose a week-end day to make it more convenient for working families. That's not happening here.

The other factor is weather. If you've worked at the polls, the conversation goes, "I hope the weather isn't too good today...or too bad." Weather does affect voter participation.

Recently I've visited with several older people about mail-in voting. I heard that their age, ability to drive, access to computers (for requesting ballots) is restricting their voting. That surprised me! There are numerous seniors and people with disabilities that are feeling excluded, even though our borough has done an excellent job of managing alternative ways for people to vote. The reality is that getting to the polls or getting to the borough building (or other sites) or getting forms filled out for an absentee ballot are prohibitive too many of our citizens. And the people I talked to are the traditional "forever voters" - they too remember the first time they voted.

It makes me smile to think that we would take this issue to the voters when the challenge is that we have too few voters and want to increase the numbers. Representative Government allows decisions to be made by our elected officials.

I do want to declare a conflict of interest in that my seasonal occupation "election worker" would be gone, but I think it's time to try something different since we've been whining about "low voter

participation” for decades. Give it a few years and reevaluate. I’m thinking we can’t get lower than 6.1%, can we?

We already have scores of folks who are absentee-by-mail voters. Some of you reading this may have voted absentee in some form or another. Some do it for convenience, others because of travel or medical. It’s not a new thing in that respect. There are safeguards and our election officials are competent and professional and can handle the challenges.

If you really want more voters, take a chance, take leadership and assume that the people of the Kenai Peninsula Borough are capable of doing something new. It will make me sad that an era has passed but I’m hopeful that more of our citizens, young and old, will be included in ways that are more convenient and accessible. And in my opinion, that’s the point!