

Kenai Peninsula Borough
Election Stakeholders Group
Final Report and Recommendations
(Unanimously Approved July 26, 2019)



Committee Members: Donna Aderhold, Brenda Ahlberg, Teri Birchfield, Cassidi Cameron, John Coleberg, Tyson Cox, Sammy Crawford, Linda Cusack, Willy Dunne, Joyanna Geisler, Brent Hibbert, Sue McClure, Scott Meszaros, Paul Ostrander, Robert Peterkin, and Stephanie Queen

Alternate Members: Brian Gabriel, Vivian Rojas, and Kaitlin Vadla

Subject Matter Experts: Brenda Ballou, Johni Blankenship, Heidi Geagel, Erica Fitzpatrick, Ben Hanson, Jamie Heinz, Melissa Jacobsen, Sean Kelley, Bobbi Lay, Holly Montague, and Shellie Saner

Support Staff: Michele Turner

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PURPOSE

The Election Stakeholders Group was established to research ways to increase voter participation by developing sustainable election processes that maximize accessibility and inclusivity while conserving public resources.

Voting is the foundation of our democracy. Active participation in the electoral process is necessary for high functioning governance.

The Election Stakeholders Group (ESG) was established on January 8, 2019 by KPB Resolution 2019-006 and tasked with researching ways to increase voter participation by developing sustainable election processes that maximize accessibility and inclusivity while conserving public resources. In addition, the ESG was directed to explore all aspects of administering borough and city elections including the traditional polling site model and the vote by mail hybrid model.

The ESG was encouraged to keep in mind the directives of the conciliation agreement between the borough and the Human Rights Commission. Specifically, Section C which states, "Respondent Kenai Peninsula Borough (KPB) will establish and direct the stakeholder group to explore options for providing assistive technology to visually impaired voters, including the option of distributing ballots to all voters by mail and establishing voting centers with accessible voting equipment open two weeks prior to each election. Respondent will direct the stakeholder group to advance options for its consideration that will allow visually impaired voters to vote privately and independently."

The KPB is at a critical impasse regarding the administration of elections for two reasons:

1. The Human Rights Commission has declared our current accommodations and equipment for voters with disabilities, specifically those that may be visually impaired, as significantly discriminatory;
2. The hardware that is currently being used by the KPB is owned by the State of Alaska and is at its end of life. Further, that equipment does not comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements and therefore is not an option for the KPB moving forward.

The ESG was comprised of assembly members, city council members, city managers, borough mayor's office and community members interested in the electoral process. The group was staffed by the Borough Clerk's Office and assisted by subject matter experts from within the borough and cities within the borough.

The first ESG meeting was held on February 15, 2019 and subsequent meetings were held every two weeks after that for a total of 12 meetings. The meetings were advertised in accordance with the Open Meetings Act and the public was encouraged to attend; however, there was no public participation aside from 2 emails. A small subcommittee of the group did participate in a local radio show and had an opportunity to respond to questions for the listening audience.

In conducting its work and arriving at recommendations, the ESG adopted the following guiding principles:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1.) Maximize Accessibility and Inclusivity

Provide disability-related accommodations and other facilitative measures to enable residents experiencing a disability their equal right to vote privately and independently.

Promote participation in the electoral process for all borough voters.

2.) Efficiency and Conservation of Public Resources

Use public resources efficiently and conservatively by evaluating election-related factors such as cost per vote cast, cost per election, cost sharing with cities within the borough, appointed vs. elected advisory boards, and indirect costs.

3.) Voter Satisfaction and Confidence

Increase voter satisfaction and confidence in borough elections by maintaining voter privacy, providing options for ballot tracking and voter flexibility, and collaborating with the Alaska Division of Elections to maintain accurate voter rolls.

4.) Longevity in the Solution

Maximize the longevity of the election solution and the borough's ability to adapt to advances in technology, changes in the election workforce, engaging new voters, voter preferences, and conditions in regulatory frameworks.

5.) Coordination and Collaboration

Promote collaboration with all election stakeholders, including the public, Alaska Division of Elections, cities within the borough, candidates, media, local community groups, and voting organizations.

6.) Security and Integrity

Ensure security of the voting system, including hardware, software, accountability procedures, and the voter registration database.

Maintain integrity in the system by adopting internal controls such as signature verification, requiring acceptable identifiers, providing extensive election worker training, and giving voters the ability to cure errors to ensure all valid votes are counted.

7.) Voter Outreach

Encourage higher voter turnout by implementing a voter communication and education campaign that promotes the value of civic engagement.

Develop educational materials which explain the new processes to the public, utilizing multiple resources and methods of outreach and communication, to ensure there is a clear public understanding of and support for the new solution.

8.) Continuity of Operations / Contingency Disaster Plan

Adopt a contingency and communication disaster plan to ensure a coordinated and strategic response to any disruptive event and provide for continuity of election operations.

The ESG received presentations from the Borough and City Clerks, representatives from the State of Alaska Division of Elections, the Municipality of Anchorage, the United States Post Office (USPS), and the KPB's current ballot printer and by mail service provider. The ESG received demonstrations from two software/hardware providers. Their presentations were for both polling place and vote by mail structures. Both vendors had ADA compliant equipment for both scenarios. Finally, a subcommittee of the group participated in a field trip to Anchorage to see its "Vote by Mail Election Central" in action.

The ESG spent many hours discussing voter engagement, cost, collaboration and efficiencies. Based on the knowledge gained and through presentations and questions the ESG makes the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1 – Vote by Mail Hybrid:

Recommendation #1 is consistent with and reinforced by all of the guiding principles adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholders Group recommends the Assembly transition the election process from the current polling site structure to a vote by mail hybrid structure (VBMS). The VBMS is a proven methodology that the KPB has been using for over 20 years in six (Cooper Landing, Hope, Fox River, Moose Pass, Seldovia/Kachemak Bay and Tyonek) of its 28 precincts. The group reviewed the current and VBMS structures and ranked the pros and cons. The pros of the VBMS far outweighed the pros of the existing structure and aligned with the group's adopted guiding principles.

The VBMS has proven to be a more efficient and effective process for the administration of elections. In this process every registered voter will be mailed a ballot package 2-3 weeks prior to election day, giving more voters an opportunity to exercise their right to vote at a time and place that meets their schedule and convenience.

Accessible Vote Centers (AVC) will be established 2 weeks prior to election day in at least 5 locations throughout the borough. AVCs can be utilized to drop off voted ballots or to satisfy the desire to vote in person. The vote centers will be equipped with ADA compliant hardware, allowing all voters to vote privately and independently. The VBMS allows for all voters to vote in the way that suits them best.

Ballot drop boxes will need to be purchased as part of the structure and distributed throughout the borough. Voters can choose to drop their voted ballots in a drop box, at an AVC or in the mail by using the prepaid postage.

The VBMS is a long term solution for the borough and the cities within the borough as it is not subject to the changing technology of the current structure. It uses off-the-shelf scanners to count the ballots and printers for on-demand ballot printing which allows for greater accessibility, upgrades and cost effective repairs.

The VBMS has been demonstrated by the Municipality of Anchorage to engage all voter demographics and therefore translates into higher voter participation and higher voter satisfaction.

The initial capital cost of the VBMS hardware and software is less than that of the traditional structure. There will be other costs to consider; for example, ballot drop

boxes and an initial voter outreach and education campaign. The costs could be shared by the cities within the borough.

The VBMS will add to voter security and confidentiality as well as offer voters an opportunity to cure any issues that may occur with their voted ballots (e.g. no signature provided, no identifier provided, other). The group recommends the implementation of signature verification software and a signature review board. It further recommends to require at least one identifier be provided by the voter (an identifier would include voter registration number, driver's license number, or social security number). The borough should work toward a technical solution which will allow voters to track their voted ballot ensuring its receipt and review.

The VBMS further allows for the review board to adjudicate each ballot to ensure voter intent is correctly determined based on standardized methods and training.

In summary, the ESG supports and recommends the VBM structure for the administration of elections in the KPB.

The ESG received proposals from Dominion Voting software and ADA compatible hardware for both the traditional polling site structure and the vote by mail structure. The vote by mail proposal was \$213,106.60 less than the traditional polling site proposal. The vote by mail structure would require the purchase of ballot drop boxes which, according to the Municipality of Anchorage, cost around \$3,300 apiece to fabricate. The Municipality of Anchorage has 16 drop boxes distributed throughout its jurisdiction. The Municipality of Anchorage also does not prepay the postage for the return of voted ballots. The ESG recommends that the KPB deploy drop boxes as needed on the road system and encourages voters in more remote areas to use USPS. Based on information provided by the Municipality of Anchorage, the ESG is encouraged that the VBMS will increase voter turnout and that the administrative costs will decrease over time.

Recommendation #2 – Education and Outreach Campaign

Recommendation #2 is consistent with and reinforced by guiding principles, 1.) Maximize Accessibility and Inclusivity; 3.) Voter Satisfaction and Confidence; 4.) Longevity in the Solution; 5.) Coordination and Collaboration and 7.) Voter Outreach, adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholders Group recommends the Assembly appropriate funds for an extensive education and outreach campaign. The voter turnout in the KPB and the cities within it has been historically low. The turnout tends to trend higher or lower depending on what is on the ballot.

One of the focuses of the outreach campaign would be specifically to encourage voter participation no matter what is on the ballot through a

communication plan which promotes civic engagement and targeted marketing regarding the importance of the election process.

Another primary focus would be to educate the voters on the new VBMS.

The group recommends the use of social media, print media, and broadcast media, as well as outreach through the participation of existing community groups (chambers of commerce, rotary, etc.).

The group further recommends the KPB consider contracting with an outside resource to develop and implement a plan specifically regarding the education and notification of the voters of the new vote by mail hybrid structure.

Recommendation #3 – Alaska State Statute Title 29 Amendment

Recommendation #3 is consistent with and reinforced by guiding principles, 1.) Maximize Accessibility and Inclusivity; 2.) Efficiency and Conservation of Public Resources and 3.) Voter Satisfaction and Confidence, adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholders Group recommends the Assembly adopt a resolution requesting the Alaska State Legislature introduce and support a bill allowing for ranked choice voting. The bill would amend AS 29.26.060(c) to read as follows:

Sec. 29.26.060. Runoff elections.

(a) Unless otherwise provided by ordinance, a runoff election shall be held if no candidate receives over 40 percent of the votes cast for the office of

(1) mayor; or

(2) member of the governing body or school board if candidates run for a designated seat.

(b) Unless otherwise provided by ordinance, if candidates for the governing body or school board run at large, a runoff election for a seat shall be held if no candidate receives a number of votes greater than 40 percent of the total votes cast for all candidates divided by the number of seats to be filled.

(c) Unless otherwise provided by ordinance, a runoff election shall be held within three weeks after the date of certification of the election for which a runoff is required, and notice of the runoff election shall be published at least five days before the election date. Unless otherwise provided by ordinance t[T]he runoff election shall be

between the two candidates receiving the greatest number of votes for the seat.

This amendment would allow municipalities the flexibility to conduct runoff elections according to local preference.

The ESG recommends the KPB Assembly further research and explore the solution of Ranked Choice Voting for the election of the Borough Mayor rather than continuing to conduct separate runoff elections which are costly and typically receive lower voter turnout than the regular election. Ranked Choice Voting would allow for an immediate runoff to select the prevailing candidate.

Recommendation #4 – Voter Pamphlet

Recommendation #4 is consistent with and reinforced by guiding principles, 2.) Efficiency and Conservation of Public Resources and 3.) Voter Satisfaction and Confidence, adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholder Group recommends including information in each ballot package which directs the voter to a website with voter information, candidate profiles and proposition summaries. The information provided would also specify locations at which hard copies of the voter pamphlet could be obtained. In addition, hard copies of the voter pamphlet could be mailed directly to a voter upon request.

Paper copies of the voter pamphlet should include candidate profiles, proposition summaries and additional voter information and be made available at each of the AVCs. AVC employees would be educated and prepared to assist voters in the navigation of the election website.

Recommendation #5 – Appointed Service Area Boards

Recommendation #5 is consistent with and reinforced by guiding principle, 2.) Efficiency and Conservation of Public Resources, adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholders Group recommends amending KPB Titles 2, 4 and 16 – Service Areas to provide that all KPB service area boards are appointed instead of elected (draft ordinance attached for consideration).

It is rare for a service area board race to be contested at an election. In addition, there have been many years when no candidate files for the seat at all and ultimately the seat is filled by appointment after the election is certified.

Recommendation #6 – Statements Advocating for Approval or Rejection of Propositions

Recommendation #6 is consistent with and reinforced by guiding principles, 2.) Efficiency and Conservation of Public Resources and 3.) Voter Satisfaction and Confidence, adopted by the Election Stakeholders Group.

The Election Stakeholders Group recommends the Assembly amend KPB 4.10.110 by deleting Section B which provides for the inclusion of statements advocating voter approval or rejection of propositions in the voter pamphlet. Recommendation #4 suggests streamlining the voter pamphlet to reduce waste and cost. Amending this section of code would further support that reduction. Additionally, the current inclusion of the statements may be contributing to voter confusion.

The information provided and disseminated by the borough should be that of a factual nature. Public funds should not be used to further the message of an outside group, and the official voter information pamphlet is an inappropriate place to allow members of the public to advocate for or against a proposition. In today's technical environment there are multiple ways to effectively and efficiently spread a message without cost to the tax payers of the borough.

Additionally, the administration of this code provision has proven to be difficult and identifying possible authors of statements has proven to be problematic. Historically, statements have been submitted for inclusion in the voter pamphlet and those statements are not vetted or verified by the borough and therefore may include misleading information.

This provision of code was enacted in 2007 and has only been utilized a handful of times and typically only when there is a voter initiative or referendum proposition on the ballot.

Additional Recommendations

The ESG recommends the KPB seek support from and partners with the cities within the borough to conduct all local elections by mail. Further, we recommend cost sharing with the cities within the borough for election equipment, an extensive and comprehensive communication/education plan and administration of all future elections. The ESG promotes the collaboration between the KPB and the cities within the KPB to develop legislation and administrative practices for the administration of local elections.