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Little Hoover Commission

Public Hearing: Voter participation, registration & reforms

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Election Assistance Commission Board of Advisors

Good morning Chairman Nava and honorable members of the Commission. My name is Neal Kelley and I am the Registrar of Voters for Orange County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you regarding our potential plans in Orange County to modernize our system and provide an elevated experience for voters.

Before I discuss the possible changes on the horizon in Orange County, I would like to address the issue of voter participation in general.

Voter participation has risen and fallen over the years, with general elections drawing more votes than primary or special elections. But when looking at statewide elections over the last decade or so no massive downward trend appears. While numbers could be higher, and trying to increase voter participation is a worthy goal, low turnout in 2014 seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Not including special, off year elections, only one statewide election compares to the low turnout numbers from 2014 June Primary. As you know, in 2008 California held their Presidential Primary in February, separate

from the rest of the regular primary ballot, which was put before voters in June. The February 2008 Presidential Primary saw a turnout of 39.52% of eligible voters, which is a strong showing for a primary. But the June 2008 Statewide Direct Primary, without the presidential contest on the ballot, saw a turnout of only 19.75% of eligible voters, numbers comparable to the 2014 June Primary.

This demonstrates something I've noticed in my experience as an elections official: the biggest driver of voter turnout is interest in what's on the ballot. Voters are more likely to vote in elections with competitive, high profile contests; one needs to look no further than the difference in turnout between Presidential and non-Presidential elections to verify this. Take for instance the 2016 Presidential Election - Orange County saw record turnout exceeding 80% (60% of all ballots were cast by mail, one of the highest rates in a Presidential Election). If voters believe that their vote can make a difference in a competitive race, or that something on the ballot will make a meaningful difference in their lives, they'll show up at the polls. They just need to think it's worth their time. That being said, I do not believe that requiring interesting and competitive races for every election is realistic, and either way this is not the only factor that determines voter turnout. Far from it. Other time constraints, apathy, general feelings toward the government, voter fatigue, the weather, all of these and more can have an impact on the number of voters who decide to participate in any given election.

Even if a voter decides to vote there are other issues that may keep their ballot from being counted. We have one of the lowest rejection rates of ballots in California (of 1,239,405 ballots cast just 1.69% were rejected). The majority, 1,465, was rejected due to a non-matching signature, while 1,206 were rejected due to a missing signature.

Any effort to increase voter participation must start, first and foremost, with assuring that the electoral process is open and accessible. The ability of all eligible citizens to access the voter registration process, the ballot and information on elections is vital to a healthy democracy and an engaged electorate.

With this in mind we embarked on a Vote Center pilot in 2016, which was designed to mirror all of the benefits found in SB450 (the “Voter’s Choice Act”, or VCA). The voting experience at a Vote Center is somewhat similar to voting at a polling place. However, unlike a polling place, you do not have to vote in your home precinct, which allows you to visit any Vote Center in the County – eliminating the need for 90% of all provisional ballots. There are many other benefits, including:

- In-person polling place voting
- Open multiple days and weekends
- Vote-by-mail drop-off locations (including drive-thru options)
- Obtain replacement vote-by-mail ballots

- Check registration status
- Receive enhanced voter assistance

Nearly 50,000 voters chose to vote during this 10-day window in advance of Election Day. Each Vote Center was staffed with highly trained employees (4-days versus the typical 3-hour training provided to volunteers) – and this training paid off. 98% of voters surveyed after Election Day indicated that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the experience in a Vote Center. In addition, 92% indicated that they were “very likely” or “likely” to utilize a Vote Center option if it were provided again in the future.

Several valuable lessons learned during this pilot have shaped our planning for possible long-term implementation of the VCA in Orange County. For instance, we know that bottlenecks at a check-in station can have serious implications on voter waiting times. Utilizing mobile technology, we will be able to service voters needing extra assistance in the line, speeding up the check-in process. In addition, by partnering with MIT, we will be using queuing analysis to determine the optimum number of electronic check-in stations to maximize the efficiencies in each Vote Center.

Several factors have been considered as we weigh the decision to move to a VCA model, not the least of which is empirical data:

- Permanent vote-by-mail voters have increased 6,507% since 1996
- 1 in 5 voters drop off their ballot in person at a polling place
- Large numbers of polling places have declined in usage (some dropping up to 75%)
- Our voting system is at its end-of-life, requiring replacement prior to the 2018 election cycle
- Capital equipment investment for Vote Centers would be between \$8 - \$10 million, while traditional polling place methods would require \$23 - \$40 million
- Cost benefit comparisons between traditional polling places and Vote Centers for on-going operational costs
- An elevated voter experience

Let me focus on the voter experience for a moment. Imagine if you arrived at an airport for a flight, only to find out that well-meaning volunteers were performing all of the services with just a few hours worth of training. From check-in, to gate agents, to baggage handling, to the boarding process. While some passenger experiences might be acceptable, the majority would be less than ideal.

This analogy is vital when comparing the VCA model to traditional polling places. Moving from a volunteer, community based system to a professional, highly skilled environment, will greatly improve the voter experience. Providing electronic check-in will eliminate provisional ballots, increase security and speed

up the process. Ballot-on-demand technology will allow voters to vote at any location, without being “forced” to vote in their home precinct. Drive-thru ballot drop-off will provide a convenient way for voters to transfer custody of their ballot to the election official, and operating Vote Centers in areas designed for high-traffic will eliminate parking issues and concerns over security on school campuses.

Operational costs savings are also a plus. Based on our analysis, we will save nearly \$200,000 per countywide election. While our permanent staff numbers would remain the same, we would need far fewer seasonal employees at our central location. We have anticipated the growth in vote-by-mail usage and we have the capacity built-in to handle an increase in vote-by-mail ballots (minimizing the impact on staff and throughput).

Support for the VCA model in Orange County is very broad, encompassing the Orange County Grand Jury, city clerks, major political party representatives, veterans and seniors groups, and advocates for voters with disabilities and special language needs. But most importantly, the vast majority of voters, as mentioned previously, who have firsthand experience casting their ballot at a Vote Center are satisfied with their experience and are likely to return to a Vote Center in the future.

Of the nearly 50,000 voters that utilized Vote Centers during our pilot program, 79% currently vote in a polling place. This indicates a desire among this population for more convenience, while preserving an in-person option.

While turnout could increase, there is no documented correlation to spikes in turnout following VCA implementation. Both Colorado and Washington, two states operating Vote Centers, have seen minor increases in turnout (3% - 4% statewide) since they have changed the method of voting. However, it's not clear if this turnout is the result of other factors, such as ballot content. Nevertheless, one could argue that decreasing the pain points for voters could provide the incentive for increased participation in future elections.

Changing voting methods will not come without challenges. I am hyper aware of the need to ensure clear and abundant communication is used to reach our voters in advance of any change. The biggest challenge I foresee in implementation will be changing voter behavior. SB450 calls for two direct mailings to voters informing them of the change. I see this as the floor – a robust marketing program would be employed to communicate with voters in a variety of ways, including:

- Community events
- Multiple direct mail pieces
- Email, social media, and text message campaigns
- Outdoor signage along transportation corridors

- Sample ballot communication
- Vote-by-mail inserts

These are just a few examples of a detailed outreach plan that will emerge once we begin the transition.

The benefits of a Vote Center model are exemplified by the significant changes in voter behavior, matching the needs and lifestyles of today's voters with modernization that will compliment their desire for choices in how they vote. With an outcome that includes an elevated voter experience, my recommendation has been to move forward with implementation of the Voter's Choice Act, bringing Orange County to the forefront of efficient election administration in the United States.

Thank you for your time and for inviting me to speak to you today, I'll be happy to answer any questions.