

The Little Hoover Commission
Public Hearing on Voter Participation
Thursday May 25, 2017

Comments by Jill LaVine, Sacramento County Registrar of Voters

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today at this Hearing on Voter Participation. My name is Jill LaVine, I am the Registrar of Voters for Sacramento County and have been in this position for 14 years. I have worked over 30 years in the election office. I will be focusing my remarks today on what the implications of SB 450, California Voter's Choice Act may have on Sacramento County's future voting method.

SB 450, California Voter's Choice Act was signed into law in 2016. This bill allows 14 counties to move to the Vote Center model of voting. Sacramento County is one of the counties that is eligible for this opportunity. In this bill the participating county mails a ballot to all voters and sets up Vote Centers and ballot drop-off boxes throughout the county. The number of centers and ballot drop-off boxes is determined by the number of registered voters. The Sacramento County Election office is excited to bring this new model of voting to our voters for their convenience and increased voting opportunities.

NOVEMBER 2016

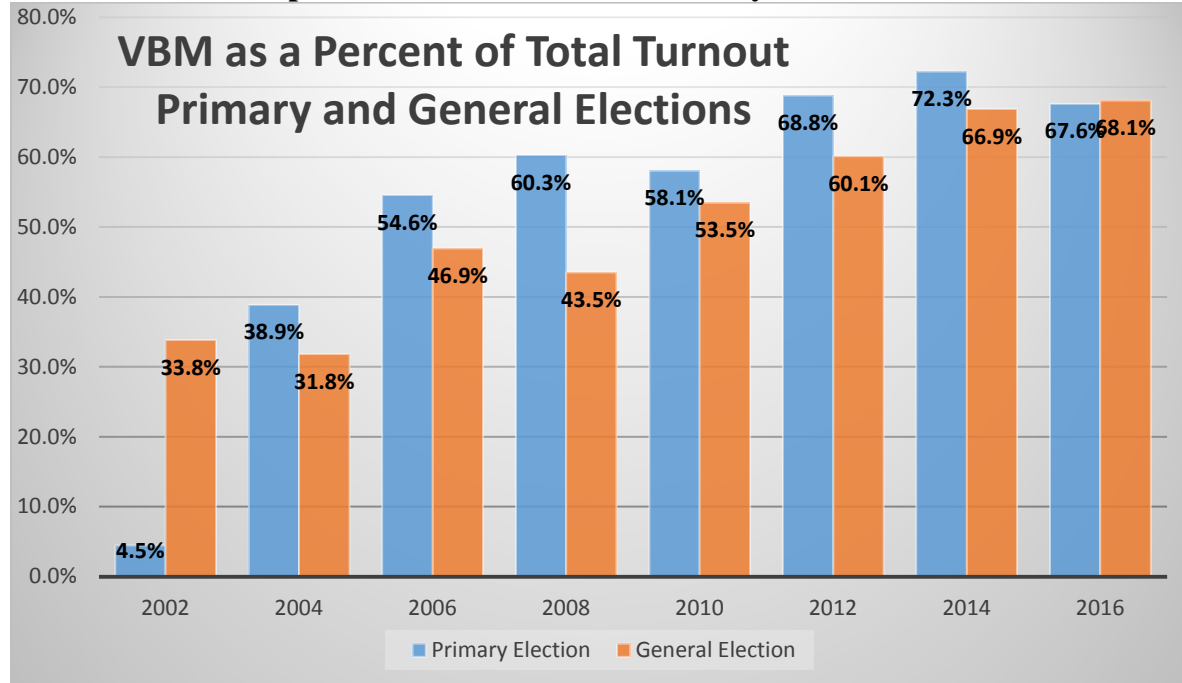
In the November 2016 election Sacramento County had 772,777 registered voters, and 74.5% of those voters participated in the election by casting a ballot, an increase over June's 48% turnout. November's registration number is the highest ever in Sacramento. Between the June 2016 and November election our registration increased by 56,784 voters. Voters could now register on-line and they took advantage of this convenient way to participate. There were many morning when staff would come in and have several thousand registrations in the on-line queue ready for processing. Voters wanted to participate in the November election. The media was constantly reporting on the candidates and kept the excitement of the election alive.

For the November election over 66% Sacramento's voters requested their ballot be mailed to them so they could vote at their convenience. 379,194 vote by mail voters returned their ballot either by mail, at a drop-off box or to a polling place on Election Day.

State election law prior to 2002 restricted access to being a Permanent Vote by Mail (VBM) voter only to those voters with specified reasons, such as a permanent disability or a caregiver of a voter with a permanent disability. Any other voter wanting to vote by mail had to request a VBM ballot at each election, a cumbersome process for the voter. In 2002, the state enacted legislation that allowed any voter to become a Permanent VBM voter, opting to receive a ballot automatically in each election. This law precipitated a substantial growth in the number of voters on the Permanent VBM file, from 9,000 voters in March of 2002 to over 90,000 in November of 2002. Between 2002 and 2016, the percent of voters using VBM increased from 4.5% to 67.6% in the Primaries and 33.5% to 68.1% in the General Elections. Twice as many

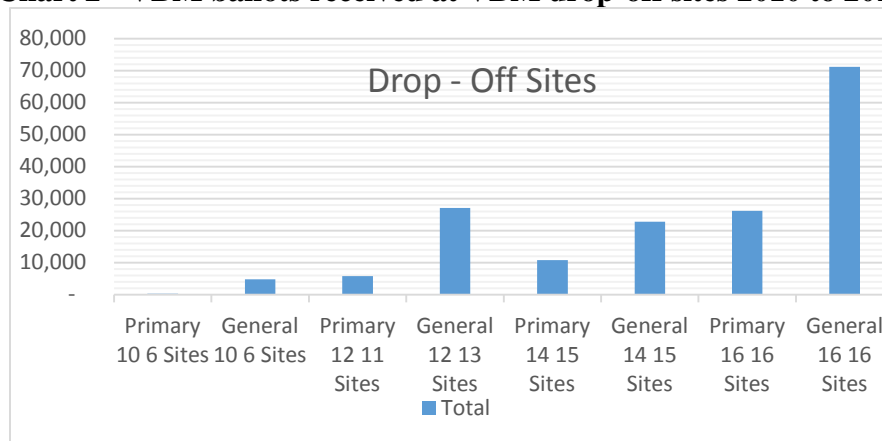
voters in November voted by mail (68%) compared to those who chose to vote at a polling place (32%). Chart 1 below shows the increase in VBM voting beginning in 2002.

Chart 1 - VBM as a percent of total turnout in Primary and General Elections 2002 to 2016



As our VBM returns grew Sacramento County started offering voters the convenience of dropping off their ballots at a drop-off box. In 2010 we opened six drop-off sites and received 304 ballots. Voters' use of VBM drop-off boxes has continued to grow since first being offered, in November 2016 we now have 16 sites and received over 71,000 ballots an increase of 262% over the 27,084 received during the June 2016 election. Chart 2 below illustrates this growth,

Chart 2 - VBM ballots received at VBM drop-off sites 2010 to 2016



With the high interest in the 2016 Presidential elections, we recognized the need for additional service to our voters and opened four Voter Service Centers for June and November 2016, located at Elk Grove City Hall and community libraries. The sites were opened the two weekends prior to the election to better assist voters with issuing and receiving VBM ballots. In November there were 1,801 voters that took advantage of this service.

By opening the four Voter Service Centers we were able to expand our service hours and to serve our voters where they lived. We also gained valuable experience as we prepare to move to the Vote Center model under the California Voter's Choice Act.

EXPANDING ACCESS

State and federal election laws since 2004 have focused on expanding voters' access to voting opportunities, including SB 29 (2014). This bill allows a returned ballot that is postmarked by Election Day and received within three days to be counted. For November 2016, we were able to count 6,400 more ballots.

In 2015, AB 477 was added to the Election Code so voters that returned their ballots without a signature could be sent a statement requesting the voter's signature. In November 2016, we sent out 1,285 statements and 794 were returned allowing us to count those ballots.

On line voter registration went into effect in 2012 with the passage of SB 561. While this allowed many the opportunity to register to vote it also caused a problem for the election officials when checking signatures on VBM ballots. The signatures that were brought over from DMV were not the best quality and the law at that time only allowed election officials to match signatures with the latest signature on the voter's file. AB 1135 in 2013 expanded this to allow an election official to view the signature on a previous affidavit or on a form that is part of the voter's file, allowing those voters whose signature was not clear on the DMV file, or whose signature had changed due to illness or aging to have their ballot counted, and the election official sent out a new registration card to update the voter's file.

CALIFORNIA VOTER'S CHOICE ACT

Voter access was most recently expanded with California Voter's Choice Act enacted in 2016. The Voter's Choice Act allows select counties, beginning in 2018 and all counties in 2020, to change from the current Polling Place model voting to the Vote Center model voting. Sacramento County is one of the selected counties, and can take advantage of offering its voters increased access and voting opportunities with the new Vote Center model.

Vote Centers and drop-off boxes will be located throughout the County, based on 13 specific evaluations criteria identified in SB 450, including population centers, access to public transportation, low rate of Vote by Mail usage, minority language communities, access to accessible voting equipment, and proximity to low-income or geographically isolated communities.

Sacramento has already begun to establish language and voter accessibility advisory groups who, along with neighborhood and community associations, and members of the public, will develop a draft Vote Center location plan using the county's specific demographic data. The GIS Analyst in

our office has used the data from the American Community Survey, the County and the Census Bureau to create a series of maps showing where the greatest need is for the Vote Centers. By overlaying these maps we have a clear picture where to start.

The resulting draft plan will be presented at public meetings for review and comment before it is adopted. The adopted plan will be forwarded to the Secretary of State for review and approval. The plan is to be updated periodically to stay current with changes in populations relative to the 13 required evaluation criteria.

The number of Vote Centers used in any election will be based on a percent of voter registration. Using today's registration figures, Sacramento would have 77 Vote Centers open on Election Day and the three days immediately prior, and 16 Vote Centers open the preceding seven days. Voters will no longer be assigned to vote at a specific polling place. Instead, any voter can use any Vote Center over an 11-day period. Voters will be able to vote where they live, work or run errands.

All Vote Centers are to be equipped with an interactive registration file, ballot printing equipment and at least three accessible voting units.

The California Voter's Choice Act provides for increased numbers of VBM drop-off boxes to be available beginning 29 days before each election based on the current voter registration figures. With today's voter registration numbers, voters will be able to return their ballot at one of the county's 54 ballot drop-off sites beginning 29 days before the election. This is in addition to retuning their VBM ballot by mail, or at any of the County's 77 Vote Centers.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

The department, in reviewing the options for voting models moving forward, engaged a professional survey company, JD Franz Research, Inc., in March 2017 to get the voter's opinions of a possible new Vote Center model in the county. The survey of 402 county voters from across all Supervisorial districts focused on determining how voters feel about the proposed new Vote Center model of voting. Those surveyed were asked a series of questions designed to provide an informed survey result.

The results show that the Vote Center model over the Polling Place model was preferred by more than half of respondents stating a preference. That preference increased to more than two-thirds when respondents were informed that a Vote Center model would cost less in terms of acquiring new voting equipment. The results demonstrate the voter's preference for elections using the Vote Center model.

The recommendation for action in the survey included:

- Pursuing the Vote Center Model.
- Advocating the Vote Center Model in the context of cost savings.
- Considering outreach to older adults and to demographic segments that are least likely to vote in order to provide them with more detailed information about options under the new model as well as the ease of using the simplest options.

CURRENT VOTING SYSTEM

Sacramento County's current optical scan voting system was acquired in 2004 and is now past its useful life and needs to be replaced to stay current with improvements in election administration technology and changes in election law. When the system was purchased in 2004 it served 650,704 voters and now the system is supporting over 780,000 voters. Because of the age of the voting system equipment, it requires increasing work-arounds and patches to ensure it functions properly throughout the election. The Election Center, a national organization, conducted an operational review of our office in late 2015 and also recommended the replacement of our voting equipment.

COST

The preliminary estimates provided by vendors put the cost of voting system equipment for the Vote Center model at \$4 million, which is about half the \$8million cost needed to supply voting system equipment for the current polling place model.

CONCLUSION

The Vote Center model has been presented to the County's Disability Advisory Committee and the City Clerks of Sacramento, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Isleton and Rancho Cordova. All support the model and have offered their assistance with its implementation.

With the need to replace our voting system, the increase in voters choosing to vote by mail and the passage of the California Voter's Choice Act it is a perfect time to make the change to the Vote Center model. I will be making this recommendation to the County Board of Supervisors on May 24, 2017.