



City of Culver City

Staff Report

File #: 18-0600, Version: 1

Item #: A-3.

CC - 1) Discussion of Voting Methods to Increase Voter Turnout for Elections; 2) Potential Introduction of an Ordinance to Authorize Conduct of Municipal Elections Wholly by Mail; and 3) Direction to the City Clerk as Deemed Appropriate.

Meeting Date: December 11, 2017

Contact Person/Dept: Jeremy Green, City Clerk

Phone Number: 310.253.5859

Fiscal Impact: Yes No

General Fund: Yes No

Public Hearing: **Action Item:** **Attachments:**

Commission Action Required: Yes No

Public Notification: (E-Mail) Meetings and Agendas - City Council (12/06/17); Election Information.

Department Approval: Serena Wright, Administrative Services Director (12/06/17)

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends the City Council 1) discuss voting methods to increase voter turnout for elections, including the conduct of municipal (City) elections wholly by mail; 2) if deemed appropriate, introduce an ordinance that authorizes the City to conduct City Elections wholly by mail on any established election date, whether under the California Elections Code or the City Charter, by resolution of the City Council, for any purpose, including but not limited to the election of City Council members or for any measure to be submitted before the voters; and 3) provide direction to the City Clerk as deemed appropriate.

BACKGROUND:

At the General Municipal Election held on April 11, 2006, the voters of Culver City approved Measure V, a measure placed before the voters by the City Council. Approval of Measure V, which enacted a significantly revised and updated City Charter as it pertains to elections, allowed for the inclusion of Section 1505 of the City Charter which provides: "The City Council may, by ordinance, authorize the conduct of elections wholly by mail, under which all votes shall be cast in the manner of absentee ballots."

On April 13, 2015, the City Council discussed the potential of an all-mailed ballot election for the April 2016 General Municipal Election. At that meeting, the City Council took no action and a traditional polling place election occurred on April 8, 2016.

On November 14, 2016, City Council adopted their strategic plan which included the goal of increasing voter participation, and studying a vote by mail option.

At the November 13, 2017 meeting, the City Council directed the City Clerk to explore potential ways of increasing voter turnout for the upcoming April 10, 2018 General Municipal Election, including early voting, drop off location(s), and elections conducted wholly by mail. This is in addition to voter outreach through traditional promotional methods and various types of media.

DISCUSSION:

EARLY VOTING CENTERS

Early voting centers function like polling locations and allow voters the opportunity to complete a ballot at one or more polling locations prior to and/or on Election Day. Voting centers require obtaining and training poll workers and securing polling locations. This option would have an incremental additional cost, dependent upon the number of polling locations, dates and workers. Vote Centers are a good option when rosters may be updated in real time in a single database, which is what occurred in the last two elections when Los Angeles (LA) County was able to set up early voting locations at West Los Angeles College. However, staff would not recommend this option be considered for the Culver City election due to the lack of technology that the City possesses in order to update the rosters prior to Election Day. Due to these inadequacies Culver City vote centers would only allow for voters to complete a provisional ballot.

DROP-OFF LOCATIONS

Culver City participated as a drop-off location for the November 2016 Special Municipal Election, which was consolidated with the LA County Election. Drop-off locations allow permanent vote by mail (PVBM) and vote by mail (VBM) voters to vote early without the need to pay for postage during the open hours of the location(s). Drop-off locations need to be secure and may be used for either traditional polling or all-mailed ballot elections.

It should be noted that staff was informed that the cities of Burbank (who had 10 locations) and Santa Barbara (who had 4 locations) reported that on Election Day their drop-off locations, other than the ones at their respective City Halls, were not utilized. For this reason, staff recommends, that if City Council determines to utilize a drop-off location, that only one location on the first floor lobby of City Hall be used. This will allow City Clerk staff to provide oversight and empty the voting box directly to the secure holding area where PVBM and VBM ballots are kept prior to Election Day processing. Staff believes that this option will minimize staffing costs, voter confusion, and assure security of VBM ballots.

ALL MAILED BALLOT ELECTIONS

Vote-by-Mail (VBM), previously known as Absentee Ballots, has been used by an increasing percentage of voters for some time. On a statewide basis, VBM ballots comprised 27% of total ballots cast in 2002 to just over 50% in 2016. For Culver City, at the General Municipal Election held on April 8, 2014, 63% of all ballots cast were VBM and at the April 12, 2016 election, 60% were VBM.

Statewide All Mail Elections:

As per the National Conference of State Legislatures Review (NCSLR) of All Mail Elections on January 12, 2017, at least 22 states have provisions allowing certain elections to be conducted entirely by mail. For these elections, all registered voters receive a ballot in the mail. The voter marks the ballot, puts it in a secrecy envelope or sleeve and then into a separate mailing envelope, signs an affidavit on the exterior of the mailing envelope, and returns the package via mail or by dropping it off. Vote by mail ballots are mailed out well ahead of Election Day, and thus voters have an “election period,” not just a single day, to vote.

As of January 2017, three of these 22 states-Oregon, Washington, and Colorado hold all elections entirely by mail. California will begin holding certain all-mail elections in 2018. Other states permit all-mail elections in certain circumstances, such as for special districts, municipal elections, when candidates are unopposed, or at the discretion of the county clerk, dependent upon the state (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/all-mail-elections.aspx>).

California State Preferences For VBM Or Polling Locations:

Findings from the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) California Voter Experience statewide survey in 2016 (Attachment 1) provides a lot of information as to why people typically choose either a VBM ballot or a polling place to vote.

- **VBM Voters**

The following are the most common reasons California VBM voters said they chose VBM ballots:

- 72% said it was more convenient than going to a neighborhood polling place on Election Day.
- 67% preferred to fill out their ballots in a place where they could look things up on the Internet.
- 60% did not want to wait in line at the neighborhood polling place
- 52% preferred to fill out their ballots where they could discuss their choices with family or friends

- **Polling Place Voters**

Across demographic groups, the most common reason for voting in person at a polling place were:

- 97% said it was convenient to get to their polling place
- 91% said that going to the polling place on Election Day was an important part of their voting experience.
- 64% wanted to get the sticker that says they voted.

Cities In California Who Hold All-Mailed Ballot Elections:

The cities of Burbank, Modesto, Santa Barbara, Arcadia and Seal Beach conduct all mail ballot elections on a regular basis.

Voter Turnout:

As per the NCSLR Report, turnout may increase because of convenience and this has proven to be true for small elections. However, studies don't show a marked increase in turnout in larger general elections. Through discussion with Burbank, Arcadia and Santa Barbara, turnout varied. Burbank saw a decrease in turnout when they began to hold all-mailed ballot elections in 2001 and the trend has continued. Santa Barbara and Arcadia saw an increase.

Santa Barbara's overall turnout for the November 2017 Election was 51% with 85.7% of ballots cast received by mail. Arcadia's overall turnout has also increased over its last three all-mailed ballot elections in 2012.

Cost Savings:

As per Martin and Chapman, cities save 10%-15% by holding an all-mailed ballot election rather than a traditional polling location election because they no longer need to find and train poll worker staff, nor secure polling locations.

NEXT STEPS

Considerations for whether to hold an all-mailed ballot election or a polling location election include voter turnout, costs, availability of acceptable polling locations and experienced poll workers, best use of resources and staff time, and efficiency of ballot counting.

Should the City Council determine it wishes to authorize the conduct of municipal (City) elections wholly by mail this evening, the City Council would need to first introduce the proposed ordinance (Attachment 2), establishing that the City may, by resolution of the City Council, conduct elections wholly by mail for any City election, including without limitation, general municipal elections for the purpose of electing council members or for any measure to be submitted to the voters. All matters not prescribed by the Ordinance would be handled in accordance with applicable provisions of the City's Charter or Elections Code.

Under the City's Charter Section 619(a), ordinances relating to an election are effective immediately upon adoption.

If the City Council were to introduce the Ordinance, then a resolution declaring that the April 10, 2018 General Municipal Election be conducted wholly by mail would be placed on the January 8, 2018 City Council meeting agenda, along with this Ordinance for second reading and adoption. Staff would then begin widely distributing notifications of this change.

FISCAL ANALYSIS:

The total cost for a General Municipal Election is approximately \$200,000 (with variations for the number of candidates/measures presented to the voters and language translation requirements,

postage, etc.) Should the City Council ultimately authorize the conduct of municipal (City) elections wholly by mail for this election, Martin and Chapman has estimated the following incremental fiscal impacts:

Direct Cost Item	Notes	Amount
Printing and Supplies	The costs for printing VBM envelopes and ballots to for all 27,062 currently registered voters would be offset by eliminating the need for polling place ballots, supplies, and Voter Information Guides (VIGs) that are mailed to non-VBM voters (currently 12,355)	-\$30,000
Postage	Additional cost to add return postage at \$.59 per envelope, with an assumption of 35% return of total returns	+\$5757
Poll Place and Poll Worker Payments	Polling Places, Poll Workers, and training would no longer be needed in an all VBM election.	-\$7,500
Signature Verifications	Assumes a 50% increase in Culver City's voter turnout (to approximately 40% of registered voters)	+\$2,000
Additional Outreach Costs	To Get the Word out about an All-Mail Ballot Election	+\$10,000
NET INCREMENTAL CHANGE:		-\$19,743 (approximate)

To clarify, it is estimated the average wholly mailed ballot election would involve a decrease of up to approximately \$19,743 in direct costs.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. University of California, Davis - Center for Regional Change - Issue Briefs from 2011 and 2016
2. Ordinance to allow wholly mailed ballot elections in Culver City

MOTION:

That the City Council:

1. Discuss voting methods to increase voter turnout for elections; and
2. If deemed appropriate, introduce an ordinance to authorize conduct of municipal elections wholly by mail; and,
3. Determine whether to authorize return postage; and
4. Provide other direction to the City Clerk as deemed appropriate.