

## Vote-By Mail in Oregon: A Brief History

*Oregon was the first state to use Vote-By Mail in a Presidential election in 2000*

By Scott Laird

With CORVID-19 continuing to control how Americans can do just about everything in their daily lives, numerous states are considering how to safely and effectively hold elections on November 3.

Fortunately for Oregonians, our state already solved this issue over two decades ago and has a sound system in place that allows voters to cast their ballots in a timely and convenient manner.

Vote-By Mail (VBM) has had bipartisan support in Oregon from the very beginning, and was initially championed by former Republican Secretary of State Norma Paulus, gained widespread use under Democratic Secretary of State Phil Keisling, and more recently had the support of Republican Secretary of State Dennis Richardson and his Republican replacement Bev Clarno.

Oregon began using VBM all the way back in 1981, when the Oregon Republican controlled Legislature approved a test run in local elections under Paulus. In 1987 the Legislature made it permanent and most counties began using it for local and special elections. During the 1990s the Oregon Legislature failed twice to expand VBM to primary and general elections – in 1995 both the Republican controlled House and Senate passed it but it was vetoed by Democratic Governor John Kitzhauber, and in 1997 the House approved expansion but it died in the Republican controlled Senate. In 1998 supporters of expanding VBM to primary and general elections used the initiative process to put the issue on the November ballot and voters overwhelmingly approved the use of VBM by a vote of 757,204 to 334,021.

While Oregonians generally have high levels of participation in elections compared to other states, VBM increased participation even more. Oregonians used VBM for the first time in a Presidential election in 2000 and saw 79.8% turnout compared to a national average of 50.3%; turnout in Oregon in the 1996 election had been 71.3%, much higher than the national average of just 49%. In the 2002 November general election almost 69% of voters participated, up from just under 59% four years earlier. In 2008 Oregon recorded over 85% participation in their November election, in 2012, 82.1%, and 79.4% participated in the most recent 2016 general election.

Cost to hold elections have stayed stable under VBM, according to Oregon's Secretary of State Office: the 1996 November Presidential election which was held at polling places cost the State of Oregon \$1.72 per voter and \$2.42 per vote cast; in 2000 costs to use VBM for the first time were similar: \$1.82 per voter and \$2.29 per vote cast.

Oregon voters receive their ballots about two weeks prior to the election, along with the state generated Voter's Pamphlet, which allows them time to research candidates and issues and seek out additional information before casting their vote. Oregon voters do not need to take time off from work in order to vote, do not have to stand in lines, and VBM makes it easier for the handicapped and senior citizens to participate in the election process. Oregon's VBM system creates a verifiable paper trail and signatures are rigorously checked.

Since Oregon started using VBM exclusively in 2000, four other states have joined them: Colorado, Hawaii, Utah and Washington now conducted their elections using a Vote-By Mail system. California, Nevada, Montana, and New Jersey allow voters to permanently request a VBM ballot, and 11 other states use VBM in certain elections, including Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, North Dakota, and Kansas. All states allow voters to request an absentee ballot and vote by mail in some circumstances, and 16 states require voters to provide a reason before their application for an absentee ballot is approved.

There are several concerns that have been raised about VBM, which have mostly been proven to be unfounded. An April 2020 study conducted by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research found that, "...expanding vote-by-mail does not appear to increase the vote share for candidates of either political party. Taken together, the researchers say their findings essentially dispel concerns that mail-in voting would cause a major electoral shift toward one party."

Another concern – that VBM leads to voter fraud has mostly been disproved by the Heritage Foundation,

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## New Senior Center/Vernonia Cares Opening Delayed

The long-awaited move into the new Senior Center and Vernonia Cares food pantry building has been delayed due to last-minute challenges with logistics and some administrative details.

The Vernonia City Council approved a lease agreement with both organizations at their August 3 meeting.

Senior Center activities will gradually begin in the Birkenfeld Room with small group activities. Congregate meals cannot be served in Columbia County senior centers until the county is in Phase 3 of COVID-19 rules. Watch for updates and announcements about food pantry service, the grand opening of the building,



Home delivered meals will continue to come from local restaurants for another week, but service from the new kitchen should begin the week of August 10<sup>th</sup>. Vernonia Cares food pantry also hopes to begin serving clients from its new facility that

takeout meals for seniors, and small group activities.

The senior center thrift store, Bargains on Bridge Street, will not move into the new building, but remain in its current location at 939 Bridge Street.

## Vernonia Schools' Plan for Reopening Still Uncertain

The Vernonia School District's plan for reopening this fall remains unclear due to COVID-19 restrictions says Superintendent Aaron Miller.

After announcing plans to reopen under a mix of on-site and distance learning at their July 9 School Board meeting, plans have had to shift again following Oregon Governor Kate Brown's announcement of statewide guidelines that must be met for three successive weeks before schools will be allowed to have students attend for classroom instruction.

"The Governor laid everything out and it's almost impossible for anyone to have on-site learning, except maybe for K-3 students," said Miller in an interview on Monday, August 3. "We're going to try and get as many students into the building as possible while following all the safety and physical distancing requirements that need to be in place."

Governor Brown announced Oregon's school opening guidelines on July 28, which require each county to have 10 or fewer cases per 100,000 residents over seven days, with the countywide and state test positivity rate at 5% or less over the span of the week. Currently, Oregon does not meet that standard; in recent weeks case rates across the state were about

50 per 100,000, with the positivity rate approaching 5%.

Another big question for families and communities is whether fall sports will be able to take place. Miller said he was expecting an update from the state concerning fall sports on Wednesday, August 5.

Miller said the District has purchased Chromebooks for every student so all students will be able to do schoolwork from home. Miller also said he is working with Northwest Regional Education Service District and Verizon to provide service for any student that does not have internet access at home. "It's necessary for us to do this so we can meet everyone's needs, be equitable, and make the system work," said Miller.

The first day of school in Vernonia has been pushed back to September 14. "That gives us two full weeks with teachers and staff to plan for our new programs and be as prepared as we can to start the year," said Miller. "We'll be watching those rolling, three-week numbers as we get closer to our opening date. We could be in a better spot by then. Things could also be worse by then. Our number one priority is to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of our students in the safest manner possible."

*inside*

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