Washington County shifting to vote-by-mail system for elections

Written by Spencer Ricks
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ST. GEORGE — Starting with the November election, voters in Washington County will need to drop their ballots in their mailbox.

The switch to voting by mail, which was unanimously approved Tuesday at the Washington County Commission meeting in St. George, comes as the county updates its voting equipment to a new system, Washington County Clerk Kim Hafen said. However, for people who have problems mailing their ballot or who want to do it in person, there will still be as many as 10 physical polling locations in the county.

A woman casts her ballot on a voting machine during the GOP primary elections, St. George, Utah, June 26, 2018 | File photo by Jeff Richards, St. George News

"It'll be a change for us, but it's nothing that we're scared about or nervous about," Hafen said. "It's a bit odd that we're changing between the primary and the general election, but we're not worried about it."

Changing to a vote-by-mail system will save the county money and reduce the need to find poll workers on Election Day, Hafen said.

"For us to replace the old equipment that we have piece by piece, we'd have to put a lot of things on hold in order make those purchases. We have 350 touch screens that we can't afford to replace, so the vote-by-mail equipment will be cheaper to work with."

With ballots being sent in by mail, it will allow votes to be counted faster and results to be released sooner because more people will likely send in their ballots sooner, Hafen said.

There were about 11,000 mail-in ballots that needed to be counted by poll workers for this year's Republican primary election, Hafen said. Previously, every signature on the mail-in ballots needed to be checked and verified by poll workers, which was a "slow, methodical process," Hafen said. The new voting equipment will be able to automatically check most of the signatures.

Mail-in ballots are already required in some more rural areas of Washington County like Enterprise, Hurricane, Springdale and LaVerkin. Washington City officials have also decided this year to hold their municipal elections with a mail-in ballot system.

“Really, only St. George, Santa Clara and Ivins are the ones who haven’t made that switch, but they’ll need to,” Hafen said.

Commission chairman Zachary Renstrom said this change will be beneficial because it reduces the risk of having someone attempting to meddle with the voting machines.

“It creates a paper trail,” Renstrom said.

One of the reasons Washington County hasn’t turned to a vote-by-mail system sooner is because Hafen said he previously believed people should have a choice to either vote by mail or go to a polling location.

“It’s been a social event in some regards,” Hafen said. “People like to come and get their ‘I voted’ sticker.”

To receive a ballot in the mail, Washington County residents must be registered, which can be done online. The general election will be held Nov. 6.