

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

May 3, 2018

3:45 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Kevin Meyer, Chair  
Senator David Wilson  
Senator Cathy Giessel  
Senator John Coghill  
Senator Dennis Egan

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

DIVISION OF ELECTIONS PRESENTATION ON ELECTION TECHNOLOGY

- HEARD

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JOSIE BAHNKE, Director  
Alaska Division of Elections  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented an overview of the division's election activities, technological accomplishments and the future of elections in Alaska.

LAURI WILSON, Regional Supervisor  
Alaska Division of Elections  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided insight into the division's voting system.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:45:27 PM](#)

**CHAIR KEVIN MEYER** called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:45 p.m. Present at the call to

order were Senators Wilson, Giessel, Coghill, Egan, and Chair Meyer.

**ALASKA DIVISION OF ELECTIONS PRESENTATION ON ELECTION TECHNOLOGY**

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CHAIR MEYER announced that the Alaska Division of Elections will provide an overview on the state's election technology.

[3:46:28 PM](#)

JOSIE BAHNKE, Director, Alaska Division of Elections, Juneau, Alaska, thanked the committee for allowing the division to bring awareness to the activities and technological accomplishments that have been made. She added that her presentation will address the 2018 election cycle as well as the future of election systems in Alaska.

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LAURI WILSON, Regional Supervisor, Region 1 Elections Office: Juneau, Alaska Division of Elections, Juneau, Alaska, addressed the division's modernization accomplishments as follows:

- Voter Registration and Election Management System (VREMS):
  - Implemented in November 2015.
  - Used for:
    - Registering voters,
    - Election management,
    - Election processes,
    - Post-election,
    - Redistricting,
    - Street management.
  - Old system was 20-years-old on a mainframe.
  - VREMS' database is web-based that allows for staying current.
  - VREMS's technology allows the division to do more.

She continued to address the division's modernization accomplishments as follows:

- Online Voter Registration (OLVR):
  - Voters can register to vote or update registration online.
  - Implemented in November 2015.
  - Voter must have valid Alaska driver's license.
  - Captures electronic signature through the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV).

MS. WILSON summarized that the new system allows the division to process voter registration and manage elections with more efficiency. She added that the new system allows users to continuously provide recommendations for enhancement.

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SENATOR WILSON addressed the new system's web-based program and inquired if the system was hosted by another party vendor or by the state.

MS. WILSON specified that the new system was developed by another vendor, but the division's information technology staff maintain the system's security. She added that the division's staff work with the vendor on enhancements and developments. She detailed the division utilizes the website within its offices.

She addressed the division's Online Voter Registration System (OLVR) as follows:

Voters can utilize the system to register online or update their voter registration. We also implemented this part of the system in November 2015.

In order to use the online voter registration system an individual would have to have a current Alaska driver's license on file or state ID on file with DMV; folks that don't have those things can still register by using a wizard-form through the paper process from this link as well.

Through the DMV validation process our system does a "handshake" with our system and that's where we are able to grab the signature from the DMV record and bring it on to the voter-side of the file, that's how the signature is brought over because we require a signature for voter registration and updates to addresses.

Through the OLVR system to date we've had 52021 voters use the system, so that's really cut down on the amount of paper applications that we have to process, and it has brought a lot of efficiency to our office as well.

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MS. WILSON promoted the division's modernization accomplishments regarding the electronic transfer of DMV voter registration data as follows:

- Voter registrations electronically completed at DMV.
- Implemented in November 2015.
- Eliminated Over 60,000 mailed paper voter registration applications.
- DMV submits nightly data file including signature imports, VREMS.

She continued as follows:

In the past we had to wait until we received paper applications from DMV because they serve as a register and it would take awhile to get paper applications, so now through the electronic transfer we able to receive nightly batches of voter registrations from DMV offices around the state which also has cut down significantly on paper applications and to date we've received 67,929 registrations through the electronic DMV transfer.

She addressed the division's modernization accomplishments regarding the My Voter information as follows:

- Web-based portal voter look up.
- Implemented in November 2015.
- Voters can check:
  - Voter's registration and absentee ballot application and ballot status.
  - Precinct polling-place information and directions.

She detailed as follows:

Part of the other modernization accomplishments with this new system is that we are able to provide a My Voter information page on our website, this is also a web-based portal that voters can look at their own information based on certain criteria that they enter into the system. The My Voter information provides information on the status of their voter registration or the status of their absentee application if they applied for an absentee ballot, it can help them track those where their absentee ballot is in the process. The portal also allows the voter to see the address

information and political party affiliation that is maintained on their voter registration, and it provides the voters their assigned precinct and polling place, so it is also linked from the residence address to Google Map, so it can provide directions to the voter's polling location.

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MS. WILSON addressed the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) Voter Registration law as follows:

As you are aware, the PFD Voter Registration law that was passed by the voters on November 8, 2016 through Ballot Measure 1 was effective March 1, 2017. We've been working with PFD on implementing this new law and the processes of gathering that information from the PFD application side to the voter registration side.

The division's first round of implementation was from March 1 to March 30, PFD applicants for 2017, so this is our full year PFD application period that the law has been in effect. So, the PFD applicants who applied from January 1 to March 31, 2018 were part of the new PFD automatic voter registration process. For our combined totals for 2018, just to let you know what we sent out as far as the opt-out mailer notices, we sent 141,144 mailers to voters who are part of this PFD process, 98,000 of those were to existing voters and 36,000 of those we to potentially new voters.

She addressed the division's use of the Electronic Registration Information Center's database as follows:

One of the other accomplishments that we brought onboard over the last couple of years is our participation through the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). ERIC is a multi-state partnership that was formed with the assistance of the PEW Charitable Trusts and it's a nonprofit organization that is governed and managed by states who are members of ERIC. ERIC has a sole mission to assist state to improve the accuracy of American's voter roles and increase access to the voter registration for all eligible citizens. The inspiration to create ERIC came from the states due to challenges in maintaining accuracy of voter registration records and through participation in

ERIC, states can compare official data on eligible voters to keep voter roles more complete and up to date. So, we still utilize our annual-list-maintenance process which we are required to do under the federal law, but now we also participate in ERIC which is another resource for the division to compare more data and cleanup our voter rolls.

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SENATOR COGHILL noted the state's large military population movement and asked if ERIC helps the division to purge its numbers faster.

MS. WILSON replied that the division is in the early stages of implementation in working with ERIC. She provided details as follows:

The first statistics that we have actually looked at show us on duplicate records that we had duplicate voter registration records, 76 we were able to identify. We were able to identify over 600 deceased voters that were still on our voter registration rolls, but I do not have statistics on any type of military moves.

SENATOR COGHILL reiterated that the state has a very fluid population and asked if the division can cross-check

MS. WILSON replied that the division will double-check. She noted that the statute allows a voter to maintain their voter registration if they do not register to vote in another state and added that the law does not define the registration period. She said because the law does not define the period of voting intent, military voters can be away from the state and still maintain their voter registration in Alaska. She opined that ERIC will allow the division to cross-check DMV's records to identify military voters who have moved within the state or have registered out of state.

SENATOR COGHILL concurred that ERIC will be an important factor.

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MS. WILSON addressed the division's election worker training program as follows:

Something else that the division has worked on over the last year is we want to always improve our

election worker training program. We take feedback from our election workers and folks that we work with through the election cycle on how we can better train our election officials. We formed a group within our staff to improve training and we have developed new training outlines for our trainers who go around and train all of our election officials. We also contracted with 360 North or KTOO to help us produce new election worker training videos which also incorporate a new section on language assistance for our workers.

SENATOR COGHILL asked if the new training videos will be used in the next election cycle.

MS. WILSON answered yes. She added that in-person training where required will continue.

SENATOR COGHILL asked if the division will continue to be alert on questions that came up during the last election.

MS. WILSON answer yes.

[3:59:24 PM](#)

MS. BAHNKE addressed the statewide election review by the Election Policy Work Group as follows:

In 2015 the lieutenant governor convened a small working group and expanded it in 2017 to discuss election policy issues and to continue a dialog on making Alaska's election system as cost effective, efficient and accessible as possible.

In May 2017 the division authored a report outlining some of our fiscal and policy challenges and looked at election administration issues, also cost savings measures that the division had identified. In an effort to address those issues and advance those discussions, this group came together and met five times in the past year.

She noted that David Becker from the Center for Election Innovation and Research and facilitated discussions in the work group. She detailed the working group's diverse membership as follows:

- Former lieutenant governors:

- o Fran Ulmer,
  - o Craig Campbell,
  - o Meade Treadwell;
- Senator Gary Stevens;
- Representative Kreiss-Tomkins;
- Borough city clerks;
- Voting advocacy groups;
- League of Women Voters;
- U.S. Postal Service;
- Other state staff.

[4:01:33 PM](#)

MS. BAHNKE addressed the state's voting system. She noted that during the working group's first meeting that the state's 20-year-old voting system was a top priority. She said the working group established some guiding principals to guide its work with the following recommendations:

- Maximize accessibility:
  - o "Elections should be accessible to all Alaskans regardless of their circumstances and if it does not work for rural Alaska, it does not work at all," a mantra that the group had come up with early on in their work.
- Cost effectiveness:
  - o Costs must be contained in order to abide by state budgetary constraints.
- Voter satisfaction and confidence.
- Longevity in the solution:
  - o The state's 20-year-old system has been reliable and accurate, but the time has come to replace the existing system.
- Coordination and buy-in:
  - o Looking for local government and other stakeholders, tribal governments to agree on changes, any changes made to the system that nobody should be left out of that.
- Security and integrity:
  - o Any system must be designed with security and integrity, and voters alike must trust in the systems that are used.
- Voter outreach:
  - o Our voters need to know how to interact with Alaska elections and our outreach needs to be tailored to get them the information that they need.

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MS. BAHNKE noted that the working group looked at voting trends. She addressed the 2016 general election voting methods as follows:

In the 2016 general election we had 321,271 ballots cast for a final statewide turnout of 60.77 percent; this election generated a record number of voters who voted early, absentee or question ballots. To give you a comparison, in 2016 we had 123,000 voters vote early or absentee compared to about 90,000 in 2014. Approximately 32 percent of Alaskans voted via an alternative method in 2016, that's a record number of voters for Alaska, around 40,000 voted early at regional office stations and how we've responded to that for 2018 is we've expanded sites, in the different regions we'll have early voting in Soldotna, Palmer, at both universities in Anchorage and Fairbanks for the general election, we'll have all 40 ballots there.

SENATOR COGHILL asked if the verification accuracy has stayed "fairly good" with the new system approaches.

MS. WILSON replied as follows:

We do have verification in process. At our early voting stations, we offer two methods of voting, there's early voting where the voter is actually looked up on the voter records, their information is verified and then if they don't have any changes to their record, we will allow them to early vote which is live ballot and it gets dropped into the ballot box without review; at those locations we also have absentee in-person voting that still takes place in case an individual has to update their residence or their name as a name change and they haven't done that yet with the division, we allow them to vote that process because those need to go through a review.

SENATOR COGHILL asked if a unique identifier is used to tag individuals so that an individual cannot go from precinct to precinct to "game the system."

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MS. WILSON answered as follows:

Up to a certain point before election day and before we have to send out our precinct registers, those registers are marked if someone has already voted, if they voted early then it indicates that on the precinct register, so if that individual came into vote the worker would see on their register that they've already voted and if the voter still insists on voting, they would instruct them to vote a question-ballot, so it would be secured and reviewed.

MS. BAHNKE disclosed that the working group acknowledged the Municipality of Anchorage's vote-by-mail municipal election. She detailed that the Municipality of Anchorage invested in the infrastructure for their vote-by-mail election. She detailed that 40 percent of voters in the Municipality of Anchorage voted by mail. She opined that the vote-by-mail election may be what the state is looking at for the future.

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She said the working group explored three different ballot delivery systems as follows:

The first one is to keep voting the way that Alaskans are now, to keep a precinct-based system, 441 precincts on election day with a combination of absentee and early voting, as it is now; under this scenario no statutory or procedural changes would need to be considered for the division, it would just be simply an outright purchase of \$6.8 million plus \$489,000 in annual license and warranty, and that was a discussion-quote that our current vendor had provided us, it's not set in stone, but that was a ballpark to replace our existing system.

The second scenario, ballots are mailed to Alaskan voters and would have two to three weeks to complete and mail back. Currently there are three other states: Oregon, Washington, and Colorado that use vote-by-mail exclusively; another 22 states allow certain, but not all elections to be conducted entirely by mail, including Alaska. Our division conducts some of the rural education attendance area elections by mail, as well as special elections for incorporation, local liquor option elections. So, existing law does allow for some elections to be, but not exclusively by mail.

Even though the division has not conducted a full cost analysis of an all-by-mail system, we would anticipate conducting elections in this fashion we would realize a cost savings and that's just for instance: mailing out a ballot package to every registered voter would be a lot less expensive than recruiting and training, staffing polling places, and then polling place rental, shipping costs, and supplying the polling place. Vote-by-mail would also eliminate the type of human error inherent in polling place voting and could increase voter convenience, like we have seen in Anchorage, but I think the group also recognized that an entirely vote-by-mail system may be unacceptable due to some of the challenges in rural Alaska with mail service and also for the division is required through the NBRA, Section 203, to provide language assistance, so certainly we would need to continue to comply with Section 203 and provide that assistance.

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SENATOR WILSON disclosed that Anchorage thought they were going to have a cost savings by their all-mail-voting system, but the result was a drastic increase in cost. He asked how the state will differ in an all-mail-voting system.

MS. BAHNKE replied as follows:

I think the biggest cost was their cost to purchase equipment and the infrastructure needed to conduct the election. In the past, the state has provided that equipment, municipalities have used the state's equipment, so they haven't had that cost. So, I think that is important to point out that was a one-time cost to take into consideration.

SENATOR GIESSEL addressed Anchorage's recent voting costs as follows:

I'm going to follow up on that, it was more than a half-million dollars more to run that election in Anchorage, \$68 per vote. So, they had approximately 79,000 cards cast in that election. Clearly you will be talking about multiple of that and you still believe this will be a cost savings?

MS. WILSON replied that Colorado, Washington and Oregon have showed a decreased cost per voter in a by-mail election. She

pointed out that a lot of state have borrowed the state's equipment, so the state has always incurred the original purchasing costs. She noted that the Municipality of Anchorage incurred first-time costs by being a new-system leader. She emphasized that the division will do a more in-depth cost analysis for the system recommended by the board.

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SENATOR GIESSEL asked if the noted cost savings are speculative on the division's part.

MS. WILSON answered yes.

MS. BAHNKE reiterated that discussion-quote for an outright purchase is \$2.1 million plus and annual license warranty fee of \$180,000.

She addressed the "Modern Hybrid Voting System" as a combination by-mail and in-person delivery systems as follows:

The third scenario is the "Modern Hybrid Voting System" and under this system all voters would receive a ballot by mail, but you would have options for returning it. You could mail it in or drop it off at a local vote center that is open one to two weeks before election day; like in Anchorage, they had five vote centers where folks could receive assistance or be issued a new ballot if they had lost theirs. So, kind of a similar ballot delivery system as Anchorage, under the scenario, you could vote in person. If a voter fails to receive a ballot or loses it, they could go to the vote center and get a new one, cast it before or on election day.

Jurisdictions, we did do a fact-finding trip and jurisdictions like the state of Colorado in Denver County have experienced many benefits since switching to this new hybrid system, cost savings being one of them in their situation, increased voter satisfaction, decreased labor requirements in training. As a result of this fact-finding trip to Colorado, and Senator Stevens was on with us, the group determined that once tailored to Alaska's unique voting challenges, a hybrid system could be a viable option to deliver results for Alaskans at a lower cost, but they also determined that further research must be conducted to

gauge that viability, especially focused on rural areas was their concern.

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SENATOR WILSON noted that Ms. Bahnke mentioned earlier that several different municipalities used the state's equipment. He asked if the division has a "ballpark figure" of how many municipalities use the state's equipment.

MS. WILSON answered as follows:

There are a small number of communities in Alaska, some of the smaller ones, that do hand counting don't utilize our system for their own elections, but the majority of the larger municipalities throughout the [Kenai Peninsula Borough] (KPB), Ketchikan bought some of their own new units because some of the clerks are tired of waiting for the state to get new equipment. So, they've had to move forward and buy some of their own just for temporary purposes, but Ketchikan uses some of our equipment, Kodiak uses our equipment, I believe the Fairbanks North Star Borough uses the state's equipment, the Municipality of Anchorage did use our equipment, and I believe the Mat-Su Borough used our equipment, so quite a number of the large municipalities.

SENATOR WILSON asked if the state's equipment is something that is given in kind to the municipalities or do the municipalities have to lease the equipment.

MS. WILSON answered as follows:

We have a lot of agreements. The clerks help us in a lot of different areas like through absentee voting in their city offices and different ways that we share election responsibilities; for instance, for me I oversee the KPB state elections there and the borough clerk there stores the Accu-Vote units for me there in her office and maintains the charging of the batteries every quarter and that sort of thing, so that saves us a lot of cost in shipping equipment that many more times if it is stored there, so a lot of those places we have reciprocal agreements or exchanges that we do so that we share that equipment.

4:18:25 PM

SENATOR WILSON replied as follows:

If the state were to outright purchase let's say an all-mail-in voting system or a hybrid system, this would impact all municipalities across the state, then. Would they either have the option of either purchasing your old equipment or how would the state thus go and train? Is that all worked into that cost because I see that whole cost shifting? A lot of municipalities could be knocking on our doors sort of saying, "Please don't change."

MS. WILSON replied as follows:

A lot of the clerks are on our election policy work group so they are having these discussions with us as well as far as getting new equipment, they've been eager for the state to purchase new equipment for a long time because they know that it's an aging system and they are anxious to know which direction the state is going to go and some of those locations that do hand counts still probably won't change, but those municipalities that use our optical scan units will either go the same direction that the state is going, hopefully, or that they will choose to do that, or they will have to consider another alternative for their borough or for their municipality.

MS. BAHNKE summarized that the scenarios previously presented would require legislative approval. She noted that the outright purchase for the hybrid system, plus the cost of vote center, would be \$2.1 million plus \$181,000 in fees. She said she was working closely with the municipalities on what the election system looks should the Election Policy Work Group proceed with their recommendation. She noted that the division has worked closely with Municipality of Anchorage and will be conducting a full debriefing on the municipality's mail-in election to address what did and did not work well.

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She addressed "steps forward" for the division as follows:

The division partnered with University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) to conduct a study on behalf of the division to registered voters in the Kusilvak, Bethel, and Dillingham areas. The survey asked voters to weigh in

on alternative voting methods, their perceptions of mail service in Alaska, and any barriers in voting. Our target of the survey was 400, we completed 408, so we are busy putting those findings together. Hopefully a report will be released by the end of May. To complement the survey the division hosted focus groups in Bethel with our Yupik interpreter, we held group-style meetings with the elders, the youth, and had questions aimed at facilitating a similar discussion about the pros and cons, any concerns around the current voting methods and proposed all-by-mail and the hybrid system. We did get a report from the focus groups, really informative and made us think that we have more than three options to consider, taking a closer look at that.

MS. BAHNKE noted that the division was hosting a technology showcase the following where federally-certified vendors will be conducting demonstrations on all three systems: precinct based, all-by-mail, and the hybrid system. She disclosed that the demonstrations would show fully integrated systems from ballot design through ballot tabulation. She said all committee members were invited to attend.

[4:24:10 PM](#)

She addressed the working group's recommendations as follows:

In recognizing the need to replace our voting equipment, we expect the policy group will eventually make an advisory recommendation to the lieutenant governor this year and once that decision is made, we will be conducting a full cost analysis and identifying legislative changes to Title 15 and potentially draft legislation. We would like to work closely with this committee to continue these discussions about our voting system potentially throughout the interim and beyond.

We realize, and taking a page from the Municipality of Anchorage's playbook is that they had a very strong outreach program and I think one of their successes in their transition to a new system, but before any system is adopted and implemented, we will need to have a very strong community outreach plan so voters know, they have knowledge, and they understand any changes should they be made.

Lastly, we will need to go through a formal procurement process and we did work closely with the Municipality of Anchorage on evaluating their proposals as they selected. So, we do have some knowledge about system requirements on both a precinct-based system and a vote-by-mail system.

Presently we have procured approximately \$5 million to put towards a replacement system. Last month we received \$3 million in federal funding through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), the remaining \$2 million is a combination of existing HAVA funds and state funds. So, we're ready, we just need to make a decision.

I think most importantly for myself and our management team is we need to maintain momentum going into the 2018 election cycle. Any change to a system takes a lot of time upfront and time to implement and time to execute. Preferably we would have this system by 2020, but realistically we know there are going to be a lot of challenges ahead.

[4:27:15 PM](#)

SENATOR COGHILL asked if the current election system is on schedule for 2018.

MS. BAHNKE answered as follows:

Yes, we are on track. We have, based on our evaluation in 2016, made improvements to our election-worker training. We have spent a great deal of time spending on maintenance of our existing equipment. We've also secured some surplus machines should they go down on election day that we have several on hand, we were able to get 25 from the state of Maryland. The Municipality of Anchorage has provided us their excess memory cards for their units so should those fail on election day we will have a replacement plan. So, contingency plans are being emplaced. In any election year, as a division we have started in earnest our planning for the cycle in January and February of this year.

CHAIR MEYER thanked the division for bringing the committee up to date on the election process. He noted that the Division of

Elections falls under the purview of the Senate State Affairs Committee.

4:29:26 PM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Meyer adjourned the Senate State Affairs Committee at 4:29 p.m.