

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
May 15, 2025
9:13 a.m.

9:13:29 AM

[Secretary Note: The meeting is a continuation of the 5/14/25 1:30 p.m. meeting. See separate minutes for details.]

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Foster called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 9:13 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair
Representative Andy Josephson, Co-Chair
Representative Calvin Schrage, Co-Chair
Representative Jamie Allard
Representative Jeremy Bynum
Representative Alyse Galvin
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie
Representative DeLena Johnson
Representative Will Stapp
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

ALSO PRESENT

David Dunsmore, Staff, Senator Bill Wielechowski.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Michaela Thompson, Division Operations Manager, Division of Elections, Office of the Lieutenant Governor; Clare Boersma, Self, Anchorage; Ayden Nichol, Alaska Center, Anchorage.

SUMMARY

CSSB 64 (FIN) am

ELECTIONS

CSSB 64 (FIN) am was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Foster reviewed the meeting agenda. He explained that the committee would continue to hear a presentation on SB 64.

#sb64

CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 64 (FIN) am

"An Act relating to elections; relating to voters; relating to voting; relating to voter registration; relating to election administration; relating to the Alaska Public Offices Commission; relating to campaign contributions; relating to the crimes of unlawful interference with voting in the first degree, unlawful interference with an election, and election official misconduct; relating to synthetic media in electioneering communications; relating to campaign signs; relating to voter registration on permanent fund dividend applications; relating to the Redistricting Board; relating to the duties of the commissioner of revenue; and providing for an effective date."

9:15:18 AM

Co-Chair Foster asked the presenters to continue the presentation.

DAVID DUNSMORE, STAFF, SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI, relayed that Senator Wielechowski had been asked three questions from the prior meeting that he wanted to address prior to starting the presentation. He relayed that the cost for signature verification was originally estimated by the Division of Elections at \$5 million for the machines and \$80 thousand annually for operating costs. However, it was recently determined that more machines were necessary in some regions, and the cost would likely be closer to \$12 million. He was also asked to verify that District 18 had the highest number of ballots rejected, which was correct. Third, the committee had questions about whether there was any evidence that the witness signature was a deterrent to fraud. He indicated that the question was reviewed by the Alaska Superior Court and offered to provide the opinion to

the committee. He delineated the case was Artic Village Council v. Kevin Meyer. He briefly read from page 12 of the judgement:

As to voter fraud, defendants briefing provides a lengthy example of such an instance, but the witness signature requirement played no role in detection of the fraud. When asked in oral arguments whether the witness requirement had ever played a role in detecting fraud, council for defendants could not identify any instance in recent memory and was not sure whether it played a role in detection in the more distant past. Based on the record before it, the court cannot find that the witness signature requirement is an effective tool for protecting voter fraud. Moreover, according to the Heritage Foundation, voter fraud in Alaska is exceedingly rare with only three reported cases. None of which involved eligible voting. As for public confidence, the witness requirement may lend an air of formality to the absentee voting process, but other aspects of Alaska's election laws ensure the integrity of absentee voting. Including the fact that voters are required to provide identification and sign absentee ballots under penalty of perjury, which carries a criminal penalty of up to 10 years of incarceration. The witness requirement does not even play a consistent role in verifying that the person who voted the ballot is who they claim to be. This is because a witness 18 years of age or older has no obligation to review the voter identification, unlike a notary witness.

Co-Chair Foster recognized that Representative Tomaszewski and Representative Allard had joined the meeting.

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Representative Stapp thought there was a big difference between the terminology "deterrence" and "fraud." He recalled that Ms. Beecher [Carol Beecher, Director of the Division of Elections] testified that the witness signature was considered a deterrent to someone who may commit fraud. He asked if the witness requirement was removed what would replace it. He wondered about another verification mechanism.

Mr. Dunsmore answered that the same method that the Division of Elections already used for questioned ballots, which verified the voter's identifier would create a uniform consistent standard for both situations. Representative Stapp shared a story from personal experience volunteering at the Fairbanks Rescue Mission where a stack of mailed ballots was sitting unopened and unattended. He had wondered what would stop someone from filling them back and returning them. Mr. Dunsmore replied that in the hypothetical example the person was committing a crime that carried significant prison time. He did not believe forging a witness signature would be an additional crime on top of the other serious crimes. Representative Stapp acknowledged that fraud was already a serious crime. He ascertained that at least with a witness signature it was possible to see that the handwriting matched. He wondered how fraud would be detected under that scenario. Mr. Dunsmore answered that the division did not review the handwriting of the witness or voter. He furthered that any mark on the witness form was considered valid.

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Representative Stapp did not dispute that point. However, he thought that something should be done to verify the voters on absentee ballots. Mr. Dunsmore replied that he believed the level of certainty already existed for questioned ballots and absentee ballots would be adjudicated in the same manner.

Representative Allard appreciated Mr. Dunsmore responding to the prior meeting's questions. She stated that District 18 had the highest number of rejected ballots. She was not as concerned with the witness signature. Her concern was when there was a signature on the ballot, what the state was doing to verify the signatures. She shared an example from the Municipality of Anchorage's process. She wondered what provision in the bill was relevant to verifying the signatures. Mr. Dunsmore replied that there was no signature verification included in the bill. Representative Allard voiced that it was a problem due to the potential for voter fraud. She cited Mr. Dunsmore's testimony regarding Alaska having the lowest voter fraud in the country. She pondered whether the state even knew what the amount of voter fraud was because the division did not have a team of investigators. She inquired whether the bill included provisions creating a team of investigators.

Mr. Dunsmore answered in the negative. He thought that Senator Wielechowski would be open to discussing the issue. He delineated that the current protocol, when there were indications of fraud, required the division to refer the matter to the Department of Law (DOL).

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Representative Allard asked how it was possible to verify a voter if all they had was a utility bill and no picture ID. She asked if the bill corrected that process. Mr. Dunsmore responded that under current law the utility bill, paycheck, or other government documents would be required to be current. The bill required the document to be within the last 60 days. The proposal was brought to the sponsor by the Senate minority leader. Representative Allard was suspect of the latter statement. She had heard differently from the minority leader of the other body. She listed a few things she felt was lacking in the bill: no photo ID verification requirement; no signature verification method; and no investigative voter fraud team within the Division of Elections. She wanted to clarify the District 18 matter. She reported that in District 18 there were 72 rejected ballots that represented 4.4 percent of the voters. In District 40 there were 26 rejected ballots representing 5.2 percent of the voters.

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Co-Chair Foster noted that Representative Johnson joined the meeting.

Co-Chair Josephson had a series of questions. He understood that many of the 72 voters in District 18 were service members that were deprived of the right to vote due to technicalities. He asked for confirmation. Mr. Dunsmore answered in the affirmative. He added that District 18 was demographically unique because it was the only house district in the state where the majority of the population was on a military base. Co-Chair Josephson thought that often military members voted conservatively. He wondered if he was correct. Mr. Dunsmore answered in the affirmative, according to his professional experience.

Representative Allard interjected and wondered why Co-Chair Josephson's question mattered. Co-Chair Josephson replied

that it mattered because the bill contained "some conservative and cautionary elements."

Co-Chair Josephson asked if the process was related to the concern about people who were ineligible to vote committing voter fraud via an absentee ballot. He provided an example where someone cast a ballot claiming to be a certain person who already voted, it was currently red flagged because of the duplicated names. He requested confirmation. Mr. Dunsmore answered in the affirmative. He furthered that in his experience it was often a mistake therefore; the voter was not charged. He offered that if someone voted twice the Division of Elections was required by law to report it.

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Co-Chair Josephson asked if someone with a relatively unique name was told their vote was fraudulent because the vote was already cast under the name and the voter protested the fraudulent claim. He inquired whether Mr. Dunsmore had ever heard of the scenario. Mr. Dunsmore replied in the negative. Co-Chair Josephson recalled from Ms. Beecher's prior testimony that if a witness signed as Mickey Mouse, it would draw attention to the ballot. He asked whether Ms. Beecher was consistent in all of her prior testimony. Mr. Dunsmore answered that it would be more appropriate to ask Ms. Beecher directly. He recalled that she had repeatedly testified that if someone wrote in Mickey Mouse it would likely raise a red flag and DOL would be notified, but the division would count the ballot.

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Co-Chair Foster asked if Ms. Beecher was available to testify.

MICHAELA THOMPSON, DIVISION OPERATIONS MANAGER, DIVISION OF ELECTIONS, OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR (via teleconference), replied that Ms. Beecher was not available to testify during the meeting.

Representative Galvin spoke to the process of registration versus voting. She asked if a person must have a photo ID to register to vote. Mr. Dunsmore did not know if a photo ID was required but other types of identification were required. He deferred to Ms. Thompson for a definitive answer. Representative Galvin stated that as a registrar

she found the responsibility of verification onerous and reported that there was a lot involved to make sure the person registered was a citizen and lived in Alaska. She understood that a vast number of voters in person used a photo ID. She asked whether she was correct. Mr. Dunsmore did not know if there was any quantifiable data collected on the topic. However, anecdotally, he believed it was correct. Representative Galvin understood that when registering to vote there was a statement on the form indicating it was a crime if they were acting fraudulently regarding their identity. She believed there were deterrents and laws and if someone was acting in a fraudulent manner regarding voting they could be charged with a crime. She asked for comment.

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Mr. Dunsmore confirmed that Representative Galvin's statement was correct. The top of the absentee ballot form contained an affidavit that the voter must swear on their identity under penalty of perjury. Representative Galvin was considering how to make voting a system of integrity. She appreciated that there was a system in place that upheld the integrity of voting and worked as a deterrent to fraud.

Representative Jimmie wondered whether "the heart of the issue was concern about wrongly telling Alaskan voters that they cannot vote or wrongly telling non-Alaskan voters that they can vote." She queried how many cases of voter fraud had been charged in Alaska in the past 15 years. Mr. Dunsmore replied that he did not have the number but believed it was a handful. Representative Jimmie answered that number was 8. She elaborated that since 2011 there had been 8 cases of voter fraud charged in the state. She asked how many of the 8 cases were from "bush" Alaska. Mr. Dunsmore believed there was one case. Representative Jimmie asked how many absentee ballots had been rejected in rural Alaska in the two prior elections. Mr. Dunsmore was unsure of the exact number but knew the number was in the hundreds. Representative Jimmie shared some statistics regarding rural votes. She relayed that the Division of Elections checked for witness signatures but was unable to determine whether a witness was real. She delineated that in 2022; 670 rural residents had their ballots rejected due to the absence of a witness signature. In 2024, 24 rural voters with absentee ballots were rejected due to missing

witness signatures. She calculated the total of rejected rural ballots at 694 and compared it to the number of voter fraud cases from bush Alaska in the prior 4 years, which was zero. She detailed that in the 2024 general election, one third of the ballots in her district were rejected because of the lack of witness signatures. She conveyed that the bill dealt with the "bogeyman of elections" but she saw the truth, and it was "disenfranchisement." She surmised that "it did not make sense that with a fairly low overall voter turnout there were more people's voices being taken away than there were folks working double time to vote in someone else's name." She asked Mr. Dunsmore whether he agreed or disagreed with her statement.

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Mr. Dunsmore agreed with her statements and believed it was a good point about why it was a "critical" election integrity mattered just as much as fraud, etc. He commented that it also hurt the integrity of elections every time an eligible Alaskan was unable to vote because of a technicality that provided no meaningful protection against voter fraud.

Co-Chair Foster OPENED public testimony.

CLARE BOERSMA, SELF, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), supported the bill. She shared that she had served as an election worker in various volunteer capacities over the years as a poll watcher, voter registrar, etc. She fully supported eligible voters' right to participate in elections. She believed that especially in rural Alaska voters needed more access to predictable, reliable, and user friendly voting. She witnessed that even in Anchorage some voters were "stymied" over the election process. She was interested in helping individuals be able to vote and strongly supported the establishment of a ballot curing process. She indicated that anyone could make an honest mistake or omission. She believed the present absentee process could be confusing for some and knew people who had their vote invalidated because they forgot their signature or a witness signature. She hoped the committee would pass the bill out of committee.

[9:47:53 AM](#)

AYDEN NICHOL, ALASKA CENTER, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the legislation. He shared that he worked at the Alaska Center researching voter issues. He highlighted the urgent need for a rural community liaison in the Division of Elections. He indicated that in the 2024 primary, the Kaktovik and Wales polls failed to open, and the situation denied the opportunity to vote to over 250 registered voters. He noted that in the same primary several other villages including Anaktuvuk Pass, opened the polls for only 30 minutes and only 7 out of 258 voters could cast ballots. He offered that the closures were due to a breakdown in communication between the division and rural communities and due to the division's failure to secure reliable poll workers. He felt that a liaison would decrease the incidents of failure and uphold rural Alaskans right to vote. He also favored an amendment that allowed early voting to begin 30 days before the election versus the current 15 days, which was a provision in Co-Chair Schrage's election bill HB 43 (Elections, Voting, Ballots.) He noted that most rural ballots were not post marked until they passed through Anchorage or Juneau and meant rural voters had to mail their ballots much earlier than urban voters in order to count. He elaborated that in November 2024, 268 rural ballots were rejected due to postal issues. He voiced that the postal issues might take years to fix, therefore extending early voting would grant rural voters more time to cast a ballot. He shared that other states had an average of 23 days of early voting. He thanked the committee.

[9:50:26 AM](#)

Representative Allard wondered if Mr. Dunsmore knew how many military related were out of the 72 rejected ballots in District 18. Mr. Dunsmore replied in the negative. He expounded that the division reported absentee ballot statistics at the district level. He presumed that most of the absentee ballots requested from the district would be from service members or their family members deployed outside of Alaska. Representative Allard relayed that 1,072 registered voters voted from the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) out of a total of 2,300 total in the district. She doubted his assumption that all 72 rejected ballots were from the military. She added that the division lacked any information regarding the issue and was unable to determine how many ballots were related to the military.

Mr. Dunsmore answered that he felt it was a reasonable assumption that many of the ballots were from the military, but he did not assume all of the rejected ballots were related to the military. He reiterated that it was definitely an injustice if 72 Alaskans were denied their right to vote over a meaningless technicality. Representative Allard concurred that no one should be disenfranchised, which was why checks and balances should be in place. She deduced from the discussion that checks and balances were nonexistent for signature verification and there were no investigators. She shared that she had identified 500 individuals who voted in Alaska and another state and notified the state, and nothing happened. She felt that there was nothing in place requiring an official identification and believed that it was very simple for people to forge signatures and use a utility bill. She stated that "criminals do not follow the law." She asked if Mr. Dunsmore had heard of the case Buckland versus Joe Miller. Mr. Dunsmore answered in the negative. Representative Allard offered to bring the information later. She reminded the committee that two people had to witness a Permanent Fund Dividend application and no one in the state was a trained investigator for voter fraud. In addition she understood that the Department of Law was understaffed. She believed that the amount of voter fraud was unknown in the state and other states had "something in place."

[9:54:05 AM](#)

Mr. Dunsmore thanked Representative Allard for bringing up the issue of voter roll cleanup. He delineated that the bill included robust improvements. He learned from creating previous legislation that Federal law prevented the state from removing someone from Alaska's list just because they registered in another state. The state had to wait until people voted or go through a notice process. He indicated that the bill added several indicators of residency that would trigger the process to remove voters registered in another state off of Alaska's voter roll. He thought it was an important piece of the bipartisan package. Representative Allard contested the use of the term bipartisan. She reiterated her belief that 500 voters were discovered to be registered in another state after they voted and subsequently, the state was alerted but there were no repercussions.

Co-Chair Foster noted the committee would continue with the bill during the afternoon meeting.

CSSB 64(FIN) am was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

ADJOURNMENT

[9:56:31 AM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 9:56 a.m.