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Guest column: Kittitas County ballot boxes are secure

Jerry Pettit contributed column

Oct 8, 2020



Jerry Pettit

This is the second in a three part series on elections.

With vote-by-mail becoming a focus of national conversation for the upcoming November General Election, ballot drop boxes are part of the conversation as well. I have heard concerns about ballot drop box security: how and when are they emptied, who empties them and how are they secured?

We have 10 ballot drop boxes throughout the county. The locations are: Easton Fire Station; Ronald Fire Station; Roslyn City Hall; South Cle Elum Town Hall; Cle Elum Upper District Court; Thorp fire Station; Kittitas City Hall in the alley; Central Washington University SURC and two at the Kittitas County Courthouse – Drive up in the parking lot and inside the front doors. The drop boxes are secured and bolted into concrete pads. Some of the drop boxes have 24 hour security cameras observing them.

We open the ballot drop boxes for each election three weeks before election day when the ballots are mailed. For the November election, all drop boxes are opened. During Special Elections, not all drop boxes are opened as the election may be specific for certain districts. When there is no election occurring, all the drop boxes are locked shut.

When an election is occurring, the drop boxes are emptied periodically. The number of times depends on the election and the location of the drop box. State law requires two people must be present to empty a ballot drop box. We hire a person to go with me to empty the drop boxes.

The procedures for tracking all the ballots include

- n Each Drop Box has its own log sheet

- n Logging and initialing who opens, empties and locks the drop box

- n Logging and placing a numbered seal on the drop box, to ensure there is no tampering (recording the old numbered seal upon opening the box and the new numbered seal when the box is empty

- n Logging who is transporting the ballots

The ballots collected from each drop box are then transported by the two employees to the Auditor's Office in a sealed bag with a different numbered seal from the one on the individual drop box.

On election night, a person that we work with at each jurisdiction where a drop box is located locks and seals the drop box at 8 p.m. and either calls or texts me that the drop box is locked and sealed. First thing Wednesday morning after election day we empty all the drop boxes, using the

same procedures. The logs are checked and verified to ensure everything is correct.

Each trip to empty all drop boxes takes at least 3 hours. The schedule is available if observers wish to follow and see what we do.

We encourage the use of our drop boxes. We have them, so let's use them. And, if you use the drop boxes, it doesn't cost as much for the return postage. If you get your ballot in the drop box before election day, they will probably be counted in the preliminary results on election night. Get your ballots in early. You can monitor when your ballot has been accepted for tally by logging into the VoteWA website (voter.votewa.gov). Together, we've got this!

Ballots will be mailed to Kittitas County voters on Oct. 13, 2020. You should start receiving them on Oct. 15th. If you have not received your ballot by Oct. 20, please contact the Kittitas County Auditor's Office.

Jerry Pettit is the Kittitas County Auditor.