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Guest column: Ballot Processing? We got this!

Jerry Pettit contributed column

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Jerry Pettit

We always get asked, “When are we going to starting counting ballots?” This is an interesting question to answer. We count the envelopes as they come in. We obtain the results and upload them after 8 p.m. election night. (Revised Code of Washington 29A.84.730)

Another question, “Why does it take so long to get updated results after election night?” We need to start all over again processing the additional ballots received.

Ballot processing is more complicated than one might think. We don’t just print the ballots, mail them to the voters and then count the votes when we get the ballots back.

When the ballots start coming in, we log the number of ballot envelopes and batch them. Then before we do anything else, the signature on every return envelope is compared manually with the voter's signature we have on file for accuracy. If a signature doesn't match or if the voter failed to sign the declaration, a letter is sent to the voter to update their signature or provide their signature. If we do not receive a response from the voter, the envelope goes to the Canvassing Board for a decision whether to count the ballot or not. The Canvassing Board is made up of the County Auditor, the County Prosecuting Attorney and Chair of the Board of County Commissioners. (Revised Code of Washington 29A.60.140) Only the Canvassing Board has the authority to reject a ballot.

Once the signature is verified, the secrecy sleeve with the ballot is removed from the return envelope. The return envelopes are then boxed and stored. We can then remove the ballot from the secrecy sleeve. If the ballot is not in the secrecy sleeve, it is OK. We can still tally the votes on that ballot.

The ballots are now prepared for scanning. Each ballot is inspected by two people to ensure they will be read by the scanner. If there are stray marks across bar codes, a tear or anything else, that ballot is set aside to be duplicated and verified on an identical ballot to ensure the scanner will read the ballot.

The ballots are then run through a highspeed scanner that takes a digital picture of both sides of the ballot. The ballots are then boxed and stored. The scan system will identify any over votes, undervotes, corrections or write-ins. These are then resolved in the system. Two people are required to do ballot resolution. The system has an internal audit trail that records who is logged in for the ballot resolution.

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Ballot processing can begin as soon as ballots begin to come back. This is the reason we can have preliminary results soon after 8 p.m. on election night.

After 8 p.m. on election night, the ballot information is downloaded to a drive that is then moved to the tally system to obtain the preliminary vote results.

The ballot management system where the ballots are scanned, and the tally system, are not connected. Nor are they connected to the internet or intranet. This is called air gapped. It is not possible for anyone to hack either of the systems to alter anything. Only election personnel are allowed access to any of these systems.

On the day after election day, with all the ballots that have come in from the ballot drop boxes on election day together with the mail, we now start with signature verification first and continue to move through the process again. It just takes time.

It is important that we have accurate and secure election process. We got this!

Jerry Pettit is the Kittitas County Auditor.