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Hawaii News

Office of Elections pursues shift to mail-in voting

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The state Office of Elections wants to convert Hawaii to a mail-in voting system to cut costs and eliminate the need to open community polling stations across the state on each Election Day.

Similar statewide mail-in systems already have been established in Washington, Oregon and Colorado, and establishing mail-in balloting in Hawaii would save the state about \$800,000 each election cycle, said Chief Election Officer Scott Nago.

Hawaii lawmakers seem comfortable with the idea, with both the House and Senate approving bills last year to establish statewide mail-in balloting. The bills died in the last days of the 2015 session when lawmakers failed to provide funding to cover the startup costs for the new system.

Elections officials are now proposing a system in which ballots would be mailed to each registered voter, and those voters would then return their completed ballots by mail. To be counted, the ballots would have to be received by election officials by 6 p.m. on Election Day.

For voters accustomed to absentee voting at walk-in sites in the 10 days before Election Day, that process would continue in each county, Nago said. On Election Day at least one polling place would be open in each county to serve people who did not receive their ballots by mail for any reason, Nago said.

Startup costs for the mail-in program would be about \$350,000 statewide to purchase

mail sorters and some other equipment and materials, Nago said.

If the bill passes, the first county to shift over to the new system would be Kauai, which under the Office of Elections proposal would change to the all-mail system in 2018. Maui and Hawaii island would change to mail-in balloting in 2020, followed by Oahu in 2022.

Nago said the new system would have some obvious advantages for state election officials, including making the logistics of each election easier to manage.

“For one thing, you don’t need to recruit precinct officials,” Nago said. “You’re relying on 4,000 of them, and if they don’t show up, you’re stuck, you’re short, you have to scramble, you just have to deal with it.”

The new system would also eliminate the need to set up voting sites across the state and would make voting easier in the event of a natural disaster such as Tropical Storm Iselle, which barred access to some voting sites in Puna on the Big Island in 2014, he said.

Elections Commission Chairman F.M. Scotty Anderson said the state needs to move away from the current system, which includes mail-in absentee balloting, walk-in absentee balloting and regular voting on Election Day.

“We can’t afford to do what we’ve been doing,” Anderson said. “The amount of people that that takes, the amount of training, the amount of money we can save doing (mail-in voting) is substantial.”

Anderson said the amount of voter fraud in states that adopted mail-in systems has been quite low — less than 1 percent — but also said the new system has not increased voter turnout.

Nago agreed that the mainland experience showed mail-in balloting did not boost voter turnout for smaller-scale elections to relatively minor posts such as county auditor, but said the turnout for larger elections such as races for governor or president did show an increase with mail-in voting.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Karl Rhoads (D, Chinatown- Iwilei-Kalihi) said he is comfortable with the idea of mail-in balloting. He said more than half of all of the votes cast in 2014 were absentee ballots anyway, “so we’re sort of headed that way.”

House Republican Leader Beth Fukumoto Chang also supports the idea, and said she wants to see a system similar to the Oregon model, where data are publicly available before Election Day showing who voted and who hasn’t voted yet.

That allows people to check to see whether their friends voted and contact friends who didn’t to urge them to turn in their ballots, said Fukumoto Chang (R, Mililani-Mililani Mauka-Waipio Acres).

"You can find your friend on Facebook, you can find your friend on Twitter, and you can remind them to vote," she said. "I think it's got potential to really increase voter turnout, especially in a state like Hawaii."