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Faced with continuing low voter turnout in Anchorage, retiring election workers that are challenging to replace, and the administrative costs of running poll-based elections, the Municipal Clerk’s Office began an effort to improve voter turnout and at the same time address the administrative issues it faced. That effort led to the conclusion that replacing traditional poll-based elections with voting by mail was a solution. In response, the Anchorage Assembly Ethics and Elections Committee authorized the Municipal Clerk’s Office to further explore voting by mail.

The Municipal Clerk’s Office created a stakeholder group to involve the public in the discussion of vote by mail. The stakeholder group was established in the summer of 2015 and included about a dozen people representing a diverse group of Anchorage constituents. Over time, the stakeholder group grew to its present size of close to 50 members!

After researching vote by mail elections in other jurisdictions and considering stakeholder input, the Anchorage Assembly determined that vote by mail elections could offer voters the best combination of accessibility and inclusivity.

On December 5, 2015, the Assembly passed a resolution directing the Municipal Clerk’s Office to fully explore vote by mail elections in Anchorage. Further research into the feasibility of vote by mail elections in Anchorage began in earnest.

The Municipal Clerk’s Vote by Mail project team began meeting weekly on December 14, 2015. One of the first items of business was to itemize those significant tasks that would require considerable development and implementation. The project team called those tasks “Big Rocks.”
Community Engagement and Outreach

Stakeholder Group

The first stakeholder group meeting was held on July 22, 2015. Twenty-two people, including technical experts and stakeholders representing a wide range of constituents, attended the meeting. The purpose of the first meeting was to provide attendees a review of current elections practices and to introduce the vote by mail option under consideration. At subsequent meetings, the Municipal Clerk’s Office and the project manager updated the stakeholders about the vote by mail implementation process and asked for feedback on a variety of discussion points.

In addition to the full stakeholder group, four sub-committees were established in order to focus on particular aspects of vote by mail elections. The Technology, Education/Outreach, and Procedures sub-committees were formed at the very beginning of stakeholder engagement. The Accessibility Subcommittee was formed in June 2016.

The number of individuals associated with the stakeholder group expanded to include other interested entities. As of January 2017, 49 engaged stakeholders represent constituents from a number of community groups.

| Access Alaska                  | Alaska State Legislature |
| Anchorage Economic Development | GCI                      |
| Corporation AEDC              | The Foraker Group        |
| Anchorage School Board        | AFACT                    |
| Anchorage Election Commission | UAA                      |
| League of Women Voters        | MOA Office of Equal Opportunity |
| MOA GIS                       | NAACP                    |
| First Alaskans Institute      | Anchorage Community Land Trust |
| SOA DOE                      | Alaska Center            |
| Coady Bowman                  | ACLU                     |
| Alaska Map Science            | Mayor’s Office           |
| Office of the Governor        | Anchorage Assembly       |
| U.S. Post Office              | Disability Law Center    |
| MOA Election Workers          | And the public           |

Continued engagement and further expansion of interested stakeholder participants is anticipated.
Collaboration with State of Alaska Division of Elections

The State of Alaska Division of Elections maintains the voter registration database. The Municipality of Anchorage relies on state voter records from this database to confirm voter eligibility and to accurately order the number of ballots needed in each election.

Vote by mail elections depend to an even larger degree on precise voter data because all eligible voters receive ballot materials at their mailing address of record about two to three weeks before Election Day.

The Lt Governor and the Division of Elections have been supportive of the Municipality of Anchorage’s efforts to implement vote by mail as demonstrated by the following:

- In March 2016, the project manager initiated discussion with Division of Elections IT about anticipated data needs and how those needs could most agreeably be met.
- In October 2016, the Municipal Clerk’s Office and the Director of Elections teleconferenced with the Division of Elections about specific ways that both entities might collaborate to reduce costs and increase efficiencies in joint efforts.
- In February of 2017, the two agencies began defining the data sharing options and work started on delivering test data.

Continued collaboration with the Division of Elections is anticipated as the project moves forward.

Technology and Equipment

Ballot Drop Boxes

Typically in vote by mail elections, all eligible voters receive ballot materials at their mailing address of record about two to three weeks before Election Day and enjoy multiple options for returning their voted ballot materials. Those options include returning the ballots by mail, dropping them at ballot drop locations, or at accessible vote centers.

Ballot drop boxes are used in a number of jurisdictions nationwide. The Municipal Clerk’s Office began researching the use and purchase of ballot drop boxes beginning in August 2015. A ballot drop box functions similar to a book return unit at a library, but it is designed and built to include security features that resist tampering and vandalism.

In September 2015, the Municipal Clerk’s Office initiated the purchase of three Laserfab Vote Armor ballot drop boxes. The Municipal Clerk’s Office tested one ballot drop box during the 2016 Regular Municipal Election and chose Fairview Recreation Center as the test site. To publicize the availability of the ballot drop box as an alternative to returning absentee ballot materials by mail, the Municipal Clerk’s Office sent letters to all registered voters in the Fairview area, made a presentation to the Fairview Community Council, issued a press release, posted information on its social media platforms, and inserted a flyer about the ballot drop box in the outgoing absentee by mail ballot packets.
The Fairview ballot drop box test was a success!

By Election Day, April 5, 2016, 120 voters had opted to return their absentee by mail ballots via the ballot drop box.

In June 2016, the Municipal Clerk’s Office initiated the purchase of nine more Laserfab Vote Armor ballot drop boxes, bringing the total number of drop boxes planned throughout the municipality to twelve.

The Municipal Clerk’s Office – with advice from stakeholders and other engaged community members – went through a site selection process to find locations with good lighting, government property ownership, excellent vehicular and pedestrian traffic flow, and, if possible, outdoor security cameras already in place.

The Municipal Clerk’s Office then sought and was granted permission to place the drop boxes for the 2018 vote by mail election at:

- **Loussac Library**, 3600 Denali Street
- **Anchorage School District Education Center**, 5530 East Northern Lights Blvd
- **Bartlett High School**, 1101 Golden Bear Drive
- **Clark Middle School**, 150 Bragaw Street
- **Dimond High School**, 2909 West 88th Avenue
- **Fairview Community Recreation Center**, 1121 East 10th Avenue
- **Service High School**, 5577 Abbott Road
- **South Anchorage High School**, 13400 Elmore Road
- **Spenard Community Recreation Center**, 2020 West 48th Avenue
- **UAA Alaska Airlines Center**, 3550 Providence Drive
- **Eagle River Town Center**, 12001 Business Blvd #123
- **Girdwood Community Center**, 250 Egloff Drive

Four ballot drop boxes will be used in the 2017 Regular Municipal Election. They will be located at Fairview Recreation Center, Clark Middle School, Alaska Airlines Center at UAA, and Dimond High School.
Vote by Mail Election Technology

The Municipal Clerk’s Office and the RDI Project Management team investigated the equipment and technology needed to begin processing vote by mail elections. As a result of the investigation, the RDI team developed three RFPs:

1. Inbound mail and signature verification
2. Election management and ballot tabulation
3. Outbound mailing services.

The joint Municipal Clerk’s Office and RDI team immediately began focusing efforts on refining and issuing the first two RFPs.

Bell & Howell was selected to provide the inbound mail and signature verification solutions. The Inbound mail and signature verification systems purchased through Bell and Howell include a Criterion Elevate high speed mail processing sorter and associated hardware, software and licenses; customizations; warranty, training, and support services, and project management.

Dominion Voting was selected to provide the election management and ballot scanning and tabulation systems. Dominion Voting will supply the Democracy Suite Election Management System; ImageCast Central Scanner/workstations and related software and licenses; ImageCast Adjudication Application with workstations and licenses; warranties; training; support services; and project management. Dominion Voting installed the election management and ballot scanning and tabulation system in February 2017.
Space

In looking ahead to a future vote by mail election process, concerns arose about the adequacy of space in City Hall to accommodate the new technologies and equipment. Ultimately, it was decided a designated election processing space was desirable. After several site visits to other vote by mail jurisdictions, and scoping its own needs, the Municipal Clerk’s Office created a list of attributes and a search was undertaken, starting with checking the Municipality’s and the Anchorage School District’s inventory.

Ultimately, the project turned to the private sector for space. The selected space meets the current and anticipated needs. There is 13,036 square feet of warehouse/office space, enough to house all of the elections functions. On November 15, 2016, the Anchorage Assembly approved a three-year lease. Negotiations with the building property manager were completed on December 20, 2016.

Soon after the lease was negotiated, the work of transforming the space into an election processing center began.
The Anchorage Assembly approved Vote by Mail legislation on February 28, 2017.
The Vote by Mail Project Team is reviewing the Outbound Mailing Services RFP. Vendor selection is anticipated by mid-March 2017.
Internal procedure development begins in March 2017.
Bell & Howell will install the inbound mail and signature verification solutions in early summer 2017.
Staffing plan will be under development beginning in May 2017.

For more information about vote by mail elections, please visit the Anchorage Vote by Mail web page at http://www.muni.org/elections. You may also email elections@muni.org or call 907-243-VOTE (8683).