

## ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT

Providing a responsive, transparent, and professional approach to conducting elections

December 15, 2015

Lynda Roberts  
REGISTRAR OF VOTERS

Melvin Briones  
ASSISTANT REGISTRAR OF  
VOTERS

Marin County Board of Supervisors  
3501 Civic Center Drive  
San Rafael, CA 94903

**SUBJECT:** Policy Option Regarding Postage for All Vote-by-Mail Ballots

PO Box E  
San Rafael, CA 94913

Dear Board Members:

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Marin County Civic Center  
3501 Civic Center Drive  
Suite 121  
San Rafael, CA 94903  
415 473 6456 T  
415 473 6447 F  
415 473 6899 TTY  
www.marinvotes.org  
elections@marincounty.org

1. Accept report regarding potential County payment of postage for all returned vote-by-mail ballots, and
2. Provide direction to staff.

**SUMMARY:** Currently, when a voting precinct has 250 or fewer voters, the Registrar of Voters can designate the precinct to be all vote-by-mail (Elections Code §3005). Since there is no polling place in this situation, the County Elections Department is obligated to pay the return postage for vote-by-mail ballots. In the November 2014 election, 589 ballots were returned from all-mail precincts, which resulted in \$772 in County postage costs.

A member of the Marin County Election Advisory Committee pointed out that the City and County of San Francisco pays the return postage for all vote-by-mail ballots (VBM), and proposed having the Marin County Elections Department do the same. Responses from 38 counties to an informal survey show that currently, only San Francisco and Alpine County pay return postage for all vote-by-mail ballots; Alpine is a mail-only county. The Election Advisory Committee discussed this issue several times, and at its meeting of August 14, 2015, nine of the ten members present supported the concept.

The policy question for consideration at this time for your Board is whether the Elections Department should use Business Reply Mail (BRM) to pay the postage for all ballots returned through the U.S. Postal Service. The following information outlines some pros and cons of the proposal, and potential cost.

Pros

- Would make voting by mail more convenient
- Would possibly increase vote-by-mail turnout
- Postage is not pre-paid; only ballots processed through Business Reply Mail (BRM) would be charged to the County
- Would send a message that Marin County believes voting is important

Cons

- At the current BRM rate of \$0.584 for 1-ounce, ongoing cost of \$35,000-\$55,000 per election – depending on size of election and vote-by-mail turnout. Each additional ounce would cost \$0.21
- Polling places are still required by statute, so polling places cannot be closed to reduce costs even if the vote-by-mail turnout increases
- Business Reply Mail will add at least 1 day of processing by the post office
- A pilot program would be confusing to voters, so an ongoing program should be considered – if any
- Under the current billing practice for attributing elections costs, the cost for postage paid through BRM is not included, thus it is not pro-rated among the jurisdictions calling an election.

Potential Cost

Based on recent elections, the table below shows the potential cost of paying return postage in low-, medium-, and high-turnout elections:


Election/Turnout	VBM Issued x BRM rate <i>Cost if 100% issued were returned</i>	VBM Returned x BRM rate <i>Cost based on actual return</i>
Presidential Primary June 5, 2012 49.81%	89,762 x \$0.584 = \$52,421	49,748 x \$0.584 = \$29,053
Statewide General November 4, 2014 60.10%	106,009 x \$0.584 = \$61,909	64,810 x \$0.584 = \$37,849
Presidential General November 6, 2012 87.37%	106,847 x \$0.584 = \$62,399	88,379 x \$0.584 = \$51,613

Paying the return postage on vote-by-mail ballots would have a neutral impact to election administration. The program could be implemented in time for the June 2016 Presidential Primary election, if your Board directed staff to proceed with implementation.

**FISCAL/STAFFING IMPACT:** One-time funds for the June 2016 election may be available in the Elections Department’s FY 2015-2016 budget. FY 2016-17 ongoing costs of approximately \$40,000 to \$50,000 would be included in the FY 2016-18 Proposed Budget.

**REVIEWED BY:**      Department of Finance      N/A  
                            County Counsel            N/A  
                            Human Resources        N/A

**SIGNATURE:**

  
 Lynda Roberts  
 Registrar of Voters