

Published September 30th, 2020

Your voting questions answered

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

The long-awaited general election of November 2020 is fast approaching. According to Assistant Registrar of Voters Scott Konopasek, voters in California have been voting by mail for over 20 years and every elected official in the state has been elected by a majority of mail-in ballots. "If you trusted it last time, you should trust it this time," he advised.

The county is making it even easier to vote this year. Secure locked ballot drop boxes are increasing from 12 to 43. In Lamorinda, these secure ballot boxes are located at the Lafayette School District Office, the Albert Hall Library at Saint Mary's College in Moraga and at Orinda City Hall. There are many other secure locked ballot boxes throughout the county, including the Contra Costa County Clerk-Recorder-Elections Office at 555 Escobar St. in Martinez.

All ballots are collected daily from drop boxes and polling locations. When a ballot is received by Elections, staff will validate the ballot by checking to see that the signature on the outside envelope matches the signature on the voter's registration. If it doesn't, the voter will be notified of the problem and given an opportunity to cure the problem. Konopasek says that half of all rejected ballots are ones where the voter forgot to sign the envelope, or the signature doesn't match.

Voting early will be great for the election, Konopasek said. The more ballots that are received early, the easier counting the ballots will be. Additionally, the more ballots cast early, the less strain and stress there will be at polling places, and that would result in shorter waiting times to vote. The earlier ballots are turned in, the faster they can be counted and the sooner the results of the election will be known, although, as with any election, the results will not be official until certified by the county election official.

Here are some dates to be aware of: Election day is Tuesday, Nov. 3 and this year, on Oct. 5 all registered voters will automatically be mailed a vote-by-mail ballot for the general election. The deadline to register online to vote is Monday, Oct. 19. Registering by mail must be postmarked by that date as well, but if you miss that deadline, the deadline to register in person is election day. Eligible citizens can go to their county election office, polling place, or vote center to register and vote conditionally. These ballots will be processed as soon as the county elections office has completed the voter registration verification process.

Early voting - which means returning your ballot to elections early, via mail, secure drop box or bringing it to Elections in Martinez - will start on Oct. 5, and run through the Monday before election day. In addition, there will be some 18 polling places throughout Contra Costa County that will be open for in-person voting, with early voting offered in Lamorinda at the Veteran's Memorial Building in Lafayette, and the Moraga Library. Both will be open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 30 and Monday, Nov. 2, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 31. There are other early polling places nearby, such as in Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek. All polling places will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Nov. 3.

The actual deadline for ballots being received is 17 days after election day, and those ballots, provided they have been postmarked on election day or earlier will be counted by Nov. 20. What if your ballot is received within the 17-day period after election day, but you actually voted at the polls? If you mail in a vote-by-mail ballot, that is the one that will be counted, according to Konopasek. You cannot change your mind and vote differently on election day, unless, of course, you bring in your mail-in-ballot to the polling site and surrender it. In that case, you can vote a regular ballot on election day. This year, poll workers will be able to access the county's central data base to see if a voter's mail-in-ballot has been received by Elections. If not, the voter can vote a regular ballot.

Voters can use the ballottrax website (<https://california.ballottrax.net/voter/>) to see when your ballot is mailed out to you, when it is received back by Elections, and when it is counted. You will also be able to see if your ballot is rejected. If your ballot is received by mail after election day but before the 17-day cut-off, there will still be time to correct the problem and your vote will be counted.

If you arrive at your polling place, and they say that you have already voted, you can vote a provisional

ballot. If someone else returned your ballot, the signature on the envelope would have to match your registration signature.

The last possible day for a voter who failed to sign the vote-by-mail ballot envelope to correct the mistake is Dec. 1. If you forgot to sign the envelope, you can either sign the identification envelope at the office of the county elections official or complete and submit an "unsigned ballot statement" in person to the county elections official, or by mail, email or fax. The election must be certified by the county elections official to the county board of supervisors no later than Dec. 3.

It is a crime to vote twice in an election within most states. Konopasek urges everyone to vote, but only once.

More information on where and how to vote: <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/where-and-how>

For a computer generated personalized sample ballot, visit: https://ballotpedia.org/Sample_Ballot_Lookup

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