



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

King County Elections Operations—October 3, 2005

In June 2005 the County Council contracted with The Election Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, preserving and improving the democratic process, to conduct a management audit of King County Elections Operations. In initiating this management audit, the County Council's overarching goal was to restore voter confidence in the county's election process. Voter confidence had been eroded due to process breakdowns that occurred in recent elections that were highlighted by the exceptionally close gubernatorial election of 2004.

The overall audit conclusion is that elections management and staff have made significant progress in improving the county's election processes since the 2004 primary and general elections. Nevertheless, specific elements of the county's elections operations and state law present challenges and risks for the future. Additional improvements are needed to efficiently restore voter confidence.

Audit Objectives

The primary audit objective was to review election operations to identify opportunities for improved organizational, managerial, and procedural performance. The audit focused on election characteristics and processes that impacted the accuracy and timeliness of the 2004 election, and examined the underlying causes of elections errors and procedural breakdowns in eight areas:

- Delayed mailing of absentee ballots, particularly ballots for military and overseas voters, and ineffective quality control mechanisms related to envelopes mailed without ballots;
- Uncounted ballots found after elections were certified;
- Untimely processing of new and updated voter registrations that resulted in incomplete, incorrect, or missing signature images in the voter registration database;
- Inadequate procedures for tracking notifications of felon convictions, canceling voter registrations for deceased persons and convicted felons, and retaining notification and cancellation records;
- Reconciliation of the number of votes cast with the number of votes credited and reported;
- Preparation and documentation of the mail ballot report produced during certification of elections;
- Insertion of provisional ballots into the voting machines without proper verification of voter signatures and controls to prevent the possibility of multiple voting; and
- Adequacy of controls for ballot inventory released to poll workers, accounting for the number of absentee ballots returned, and of ballots printed on demand.

The audit also included a review of the Elections Section's organizational and management structure; facilities, security, and technology; general internal controls; temporary worker training standards, supervision, and evaluation; and organizational compliance with federal, state, and local laws.

Audit Conclusion and Summary of Findings

The audit concluded that increased elections oversight, accountability, and performance could be achieved by:

- Elevating the Elections Section to the level of a division within the Department of Executive Services and hiring a strong corps of mid-level managers to work with executive management in successfully achieving the section's mission and strategic objectives.
- Revising state elections laws to allow sufficient time for key tasks to be performed during the election preparation and canvassing cycles, which would improve the accuracy and timeliness of election results. Legislative revisions are also needed to extend mandated deadlines to ensure sufficient time for mailing and returning absentee ballots to military and overseas voters.
- Consolidating facilities and upgrading security to strengthen elections efficiency and credibility. Dispersed elections facilities and inadequate working conditions created inefficiencies that may have contributed to 2004 ballot processing errors. In addition, as shown in the photograph at the top of page 2, insufficient security provisions at the mail ballot operation satellite and the election distribution center facilities fostered the perception, or posed an actual risk, of compromised election results.



This photograph shows a gap at the top of a secure cage containing voted ballots.

balloting processes. (The county now operates 527 poll sites, while most voters vote by mail.)

Where applicable, the audit report indicates actions by the Elections Section already taken or planned to address the audit findings and improve processes.

Professional Practices Review

The audit also reviewed King County's organization and management of the elections function, facilities and security, and other elections practices in relation to applicable professional elections practices. A compilation of additional professional elections practices is appended to the audit report as a useful guide for comparing King County's practices to those of other jurisdictions throughout the nation, and for selecting among many opportunities to enhance its operations. Examples of such practices include:

- Optimizing the effectiveness of the elections data information management system (DIMS Net) by fully documenting unique system modifications; ensuring that modifications are compatible with statewide data exchange software; and developing a comprehensive strategic plan to guide future technology investments.
 - Improving internal controls to account for printing on-demand ballots at multiple locations; and requiring supervisors to monitor, record, and balance daily on-demand ballot activities.
 - Developing and annually updating detailed elections procedural manuals and desk manuals, particularly for poll workers and other temporary personnel to ensure that elections tasks are performed correctly. In addition, interactive training resources, enhanced supervision, and formal performance evaluations are needed for temporary workers to reinforce adherence to standard elections operating procedures and practices.
 - Adopting a more rigorous approach for recruiting bilingual poll workers for placement at targeted county polling sites, and for increasing the number of polling places that are accessible for voters with disabilities, including non-visual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired. The U.S. Department of Justice has been aggressively enforcing legal provisions relating to accessibility for voters with disabilities.
 - Evaluating a vote-by-mail policy, with or without regional voting centers, to streamline future elections. County elections are highly complex due to a large volume of voters and dual
- Providing voters extensive, in-person early voting as much as three weeks prior to the election date at conveniently located regional voting centers throughout the county.
 - Seeking legislative changes that allow early tabulating of absentee ballots, but withholding ballot count results until the polls close on Election Day.
 - Establishing an Election Task Force of high-level county officials and managers from all three branches of county government to provide assistance on Election Day (e.g., help recruit employees as poll workers and troubleshooters) and to build confidence in the election process.
 - Implementing a Partners in Democracy, Adopt-a-Polling Place, or similar program to maximize voter outreach and feedback on important election issues and to recruit poll workers from the community, charitable organizations, or corporate workplace (e.g., employers provide paid "civic leave" to employees who work as elections volunteers, provide accessible location for poll site, etc).
 - Offering on-line candidate filing through the county Web site that allows candidates to download, sign, and submit an e-filing form and fees.

Recommendations and Executive Response

The audit report contains 25 recommendations for operational improvements consistent with the findings summarized above. The County Executive concurred with their intent, noting that implementation was either underway or planned in 2006.