

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5063

As of January 16, 2019

Title: An act relating to prepaid postage for all election ballots.

Brief Description: Providing prepaid postage for all election ballots.

Sponsors: Senators Nguyen, Hasegawa, Billig, Carlyle, Cleveland, Conway, Darneille, Frockt, Palumbo, Hunt, Wilson, C., Pedersen, Keiser, Kuderer, Saldaña, Mullet and Takko; by request of Governor Inslee.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections: 1/16/19.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires prepaid postage on return envelopes for all elections, with county costs for the postage to be reimbursed by the state.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL RELATIONS & ELECTIONS

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

Background: All counties in the state conduct elections entirely by mail. County auditors must send each voter a ballot with a voter declaration that must be signed, a security envelope to conceal the ballot after voting, and a larger envelope to return the security envelope. The voter also must receive instructions on how to obtain information about the election, how to complete the ballot, and how to return the ballot to the county auditor.

For a ballot to be counted, the voter must either return the ballot to the county auditor no later than 8:00 p.m. on election day or mail the ballot to the county auditor with a postmark on the larger envelope, dated no later than election day. Many county auditors provide ballot drop boxes at sites, in addition to the county auditor's office, where voters may return completed ballots.

In 2018, the King County Council passed an ordinance authorizing its Department of Elections to provide prepaid return postage on envelopes for primary and general election

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ballots. Later that year, the Governor provided emergency funding for the remaining 38 counties to provide prepaid return postage on envelopes for primary and general election ballots.

Summary of Bill: Return envelopes for ballots must include prepaid postage. The state must reimburse counties for the cost of placing prepaid postage on mail and absentee ballots in primary and general elections.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 11, 2019.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect on July 1, 2019.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: This measure builds on work to increase access to democracy. It drives voter engagement and gives people a sense of ownership. This will ensure that each voter throughout the state is treated equally, since some counties do not have the resources to provide prepaid postage. Removing barriers tends to increase participation. Voters have come to expect prepaid postage. Youth do not buy stamps. This is a simple, elegant solution so that young people can have their voices heard in the political process. Prepaid postage will help people participate who are not seen or heard in typical political processes, and who may have trouble paying for bus fare. Voting is a fundamental part of democracy, and requiring a stamp is a form of poll tax. Not everyone has money for a full book of stamps, and the only places you can buy single stamps require a flexible schedule to be there during business hours and a source of transportation to get there. We support the bill and want to make sure it is explicit about reimbursement for special elections. There is no turning back after providing postage for the 2018 election. Technology has reduced the number of interactions with the postal service. Voters have come to expect prepaid postage as have counties with heavily educated voters, so there would need to be additional voter outreach if this does not pass.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Joe Nguyen, Prime Sponsor; Jay Jennings, Office of the Secretary of State; Guillermo Rogel, Washington Student Association; Mike Hoover, Washington State Association of Counties; Chris Esh, The Washington Bus; Hillary Coleman, Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness; Cindy Black, Fix Democracy First; Jessica Vavrus, Washington State School Directors' Association; Mary Hall, Thurston County Auditor; RaShelle Davis, Governor's Office; Kathy Sakahara, League of Women Voters.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.