

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6134

As of February 10, 2020

Title: An act relating to state reimbursement of election costs.

Brief Description: Concerning state reimbursement of election costs.

Sponsors: Senators Hunt, Zeiger, Darneille, Kuderer and Wagoner.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections: 1/15/20, 1/22/20
[DP-WM, w/oRec].

Ways & Means: 2/10/20.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the state to reimburse the prorated share of state elections costs to counties for primary and general elections in even-numbered years.
- Requires the state to reimburse the prorated share of federal elections costs to counties for all primary and general elections.
- Allots 10 percent of the previous year's election costs to counties on a prorated basis for voter outreach.
- Requires production of a local voter's pamphlet before each primary, general, or special election.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL RELATIONS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Hunt, Chair; Kuderer, Vice Chair; Hasegawa and Takko.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senators Zeiger, Ranking Member; Muzzall, Assistant Ranking Member; Hawkins.

Staff: Samuel Brown (786-7470)

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Sarian Scott (786-7729)

Background: Election Reimbursement. In odd-numbered years, if state officers or measures are voted upon at a primary or general election, the state must pay counties a prorated share of the election costs. The state must also pay a prorated share of costs associated with elections held to fill a vacancy in the United States Senate or House of Representatives. Each county auditor apportions the state's share of election expenses, then files expense claims with the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is required to include sufficient funds to reimburse the counties for the state share of election costs in its biennial budget, and appropriations must be made specifically for county reimbursement.

Prepaid Election Postage. Washington conducts all elections by mail. 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. Since 2019, return envelopes for all ballots include prepaid postage. The state reimburses counties for the cost of placing prepaid postage on ballot return envelopes.

Voter's Pamphlets. The Secretary of State prints and distributes a voters' pamphlet to each household in the state, public libraries, and other locations whenever a statewide ballot measure or office is scheduled to appear on the general election ballot. Counties and cities may, if authorized by ordinance, publish and distribute a local voters' pamphlet with information on local ballot measures, including the text of measures and arguments supporting and opposing measures. The county or city may also specify in the ordinance that the local voters' pamphlet shall contain information on candidates for office.

Summary of Bill: Election Reimbursement. The state must reimburse counties for:

- the prorated share of state elections costs for primary and general elections held in even-numbered years;
- the prorated share of federal elections costs for all primary and general elections; and
- all costs of a recount in an election for legislative office, congressional office, or any office with multi-county jurisdiction.

The prorated share of elections costs includes prepaid postage on ballot return envelopes.

Voter Outreach. In addition to reimbursement of the state and federal share of election costs, each county auditor is entitled to a prorated share of at least 10 percent of the previous year's election costs to be used for materials, advertising, video or news coverage, social media, or other presentations to:

- educate about the importance of voting;
- spread information about the voting process, including election certification; and
- increase participation in low-voter turnout communities.

Voter's Pamphlets. Each county auditor must produce a local voter's pamphlet before any primary, general, or special election, with information on all measures and candidates within the jurisdiction.

Appropriation: The bill contains an appropriation totaling up to 10 percent of the state share of election expenses from various accounts.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Effective Date: The bill takes effect on July 1, 2021.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections):

PRO: Auditors have to deal with misinformation campaigns, and this bill will allow us to look at elections holistically and reach out to our voters to make sure they trust the election process. Passing this will make Washington a national leader in how we approach elections. The state share of costs in my county equates to the salary of an additional deputy sheriff. Having a local voter's pamphlet, with information about registration and down-ballot candidates, would be terrific. This will result in an equitable distribution of prepaid postage costs across counties, so counties do not have to decide between seeking reimbursement for prepaid postage and doing voter outreach. These issues are not new, and we hope the fiscal committees provide funding. The state's disproportionately low share of election costs puts a burden on county auditors trying to implement a variety of reforms the Legislature has asked them to take on.

Persons Testifying (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections): PRO: Daryl Daus, Kitsap County Auditor's Office; Mary Hall, Thurston County Auditor; Paddy McGuire, Mason County Auditor; Mike Hoover, Washington State Association of Counties; Colin Cole, More Equitable Democracy Action.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (State Government, Tribal Relations & Elections): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means): PRO: This is about good government. This is about equitable distribution of election costs. Election funding competes with other county priorities, and this would eliminate that struggle. It makes sense to have the state pay a prorated share in all of the elections.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Senator Sam Hunt, Prime Sponsor; Mike Hoover, Washington State Association of Counties; Daryl Daus, Chief Deputy Auditor, Kitsap County; Emmett O'Connell, Thurston County Auditor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.