



GAINING GROUND:

Improving Vote by Mail Processing Times

Every day, more and more voters in the United States are participating in elections via vote by mail. In fact, in states such as California, more than 60 percent voted by mail in 2014, according to the state secretary's website. And that number is growing.

And while this process may improve services for voters, it creates a problem for election administrators looking to efficiently manage their workload. There are numerous steps involved in processing a mail ballot accurately, which can often slow down the processing time and speed, while increasing personnel and man hours.



“ A ‘single-pass’ automated solution was absolutely critical. And by implementing it this past election, we actually ended up waiting a shorter time for vote by mail results, than we did for polling place ones.”

– John Gardner, Assistant Registrar of Voters, Solano County



LOCATION: 675 Texas Street, Suite 2600
Fairfield, CA 94533

CLIENT BASE: Solano County residents

SERVICES: Federal, State and Local elections

WEB: solanocounty.com/elections

That is why Solano County started looking for a solution that combined multiple steps into a “single-pass” processing system. Additionally, this solution would need to automate all the steps and reduce the processing time of ballots. After conducting an extensive search, county officials found a company to implement an automated system that would help transform the process. And by doing so, the county reduced its workload in staff time processing vote by mail ballots, all while significantly reducing the time taken to post voter status within hours of the county receiving a ballot.

Commitment to Service

Nestled between San Francisco and Sacramento, Solano County has been recognized five times as one of the “100 Best Communities for Young People” by America’s Promise Alliance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Solano County was looking for a solution that would help its elections officials efficiently manage their vote by mail process and address future needs as they arise.

Based on its technical capabilities and flexibility, Bell and Howell was selected to update an existing high-speed sorting platform into a “single pass” processing system and reduce ballot processing times.

Partnering with Bell and Howell has helped Solano County achieve their goal of improving services for voters by posting their voting status within hours of the county receiving their ballots.

Its Registrar of Voter's Office is charged with ensuring that federal, state and local elections are conducted in a way that maintains public confidence in the electoral process. There are five established election dates over a two-year cycle (elections are scheduled in June of the even years and in November of each year).

The Challenge

Solano County officials were challenged with taking a hard look at the various processes required to handle a ballot. For instance, the processes often included seven separate steps conducted by seven different groups of people with different skills and abilities. Additionally, these seven different stages came with specific machinery that could only handle one or two parts of the entire process.

“These additional steps slowed down the overall processing time,” said John Gardner, Solano County's Assistant Registrar of Voters. “It also increased the personnel and hours required for processing each individual ballot.”

He added that customer service suffered since many voters had to wait days or weeks to find out that there was a problem with their ballot. Also, due to the large influx of vote by mail ballots dropped off at polling places and the associated volume surge when delivered to the county after the polls closed, it was almost impossible for county officials to process those ballots on election night, causing contests to be unresolved for several days adding immense pressure on the staff.

Developing a Strategy

County officials' search for a solution led them to Bell and Howell that could update its high-speed sorting platform, thus enabling the county to meet its “single-pass objective”.

“We wanted someone to address our needs and think beyond the normal methods of processing vote by mail ballots,” Gardner said. “Their solution went way beyond our expectations in terms of design, ease of operation, accuracy and technical and scalable abilities.”

Bell and Howell's Criterion® Elevate sorter is specifically designed to meet high-speed mail processing needs of organizations with strict space limitations. It proved ideal for Solano County since it addressed the issue of automating steps such as removing the privacy tab protecting the voters' signatures, determining if the ballot is for the current election, reviewing the voter signature and comparing it to a reference file in the voter registration system, and sorting the piece per the county's process.

Gardner said that his office's goal was to get an automated signature verification result for 70 percent of all pieces, and

successfully remove at least 90 percent of the signature privacy tabs.

“We ended up with a 100 percent accuracy rate on both, using the system,” he said. “Keep in mind that we had an automated signature verification system before that only did 25 percent. So to go from that to 100 percent was a huge change in our operation.”

Trending Upward

By implementing the Criterion® Elevate sorter, county officials have already achieved their goals of reducing staff workload in processing vote by mail ballots, all while posting voting status results within hours of ballot delivery to the county and improving voter services, within hours of the county receiving their ballots.

“The system far exceeds what we envisioned to be the solution,” Gardner said. “In our minds, we thought of a very mechanical and rudimentary process close to our manual process. This is far from that.”

Looking Ahead

Voting by mail continues to gain in popularity across the U.S., in particular, the western states. Oregon and Washington are a 100 percent vote by mail and all registered voters in Colorado get a vote by mail ballot. Meanwhile, other states nationwide are making it easier to use this voting method, and each year sees a greater percentage of voters switching to vote by mail.

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