

Voting by Mail a More Efficient Option for Voters than Remote Early Voting Sites

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Question – Are remote early voting sites required by law?

Answer – No, remote early voting sites are not mandated by Florida law. The law mandates early voting be available in all permanent, full service Election offices.

Question – Has early voting increased voter turnout?

Answer – No. Voters simply choose a different method of voting.

Question – Why does early voting have such limited hours and locations?

Answer – Since 2004, the state legislature has reduced early voting hours and/or days several times (currently 6-12 hours per day Saturday – Saturday prior to election). Supervisors of Elections have the option to provide early voting for county and district elections. In addition, municipalities have the option to “opt out” of early voting for their elections. Sites have always been restricted to Elections Offices, public libraries and city halls.

Question – How is early voting defined in Florida Statutes?

Answer – Early voting is defined in Florida Statutes [101.657 (1)(a)] “As a convenience to the voter...”

Question – Why can't the Supervisor of Elections just put a remote early voting site in my neighborhood?

Answer – FS 101.657 states “The supervisor may also designate any city hall or permanent public library facility as early voting sites; however, if so designated, the sites must be geographically located so as to provide all voters in the county an equal opportunity to cast a ballot, insofar as is practicable.”

Question – What are the alternatives to early voting?

Answer – The more convenient, cost effective way to cast a ballot is to “vote early – by mail.” Whether voting by mail, at an early voting site or at the polls on Election Day, ALL Florida voters must vote a paper ballot.

Question – How do I sign up to receive mail ballots?

Answer – It is simple. Voters can call 464-VOTE (464-8683) or visit www.votepinellas.com. Requests are good for two general election cycles. Voters do not need to

remember election dates or determine whether they are eligible to vote in an election. Requests can also be cancelled at anytime.

Question – How can I be sure I will receive my ballot in the mail?

Answer – Your ballot will be mailed the next business day following your request. If you do not receive your ballot within a couple of days of your request, you simply call the office and request a replacement ballot. If you receive both ballots, the first ballot to be received at the Elections Office will be counted.

Question – How long do I have to return my ballot?

Answer – You have until 7 p.m. Election Day. Voting by mail allows voters to vote in the comfort of their homes and on their schedules. It also provides more time to study the ballot and seek additional information on candidates and/or ballot issues.

Question – How do I return my voted ballot?

Answer – You can choose between returning your ballot by mail, usually for the cost of a first class stamp, or you can return your ballot to one of 14 ballot dropoff sites conveniently located throughout the county for countywide elections.

Question – How do I know if the Elections Office has received my ballot?

Answer – Voters can simply call 464-VOTE (464-8683) or visit www.votepinellas.com to track the status of their ballots.

Question – Are ballots by mail counted if there are no “close” races?

Answer – ALL ballots by mail MUST be included in the official election returns certified to the State regardless of the vote totals.

Question – Tell me more about these ballot dropoff locations?

Answer – Most of the dropoff locations were once early voting sites. In fact, there are more dropoff sites in North Pinellas County and in the southernmost part of St. Petersburg than early voting sites in 2004 and 2006.

For the security of the ballots, each dropoff location has a locked ballot box and an election employee guarding the box. The ballots are brought back to the Elections Office at mid-day and at the close of business day in a sealed transport carrier, along with an audit form. The ballots are then reconciled at the Elections Office.

It is much easier to drive to a dropoff location, walk in and drop off your ballot than drive to an early voting site and wait in line.

Question – Did voters have to stand in line when Pinellas County offered 9 early voting sites in 2004 or 11 early voting sites in 2006?

Answer – YES. Voters waited for up to four hours to vote in 2004 and 2006, even with extended hours and using a voting system that did not require printing ballots and took half as long for voters to cast their ballots.

Now, we have fewer hours, an additional requirement to print a ballot for each voter, and time studies indicate that it takes voters twice as long to vote a paper ballot as it did to vote a touch screen ballot.

Question – Why is voting by mail a better option than voting at an early voting site or at the polls on Election Day?

Answer –

1. You are not required to go to a specific location to vote.
2. You are not required to bring picture and signature identification
3. You do not have to wait while voters ahead of you are trying to find their IDs, waiting for poll workers to find their names in precinct registers, updating addresses, checking voter registration statuses, or having to compete with thousands of other voters for parking spaces and line position.
4. You do not have to wait for a voting booth while voters read and vote a two-sided ballot.

Question – How do local political parties feel about early voting – by mail?

Answer – Both Republican and Democratic Pinellas Executive Committee chairs have supported voting by mail as a more convenient and cost-effective way to vote.

Question – How have voters responded to voting by mail?

Answer – Voters have embraced voting by mail. Pinellas County mail ballot requests increased more than 400% during 2008 – from 43,000 requests for the Presidential Preference Primary in January to 207,000 requests for the General Election. The Primary Election in August 2010 marked a milestone in the county – the first countywide election in which more people voted by mail (59%) than at polling places on Election Day (39%). For the 2010 General Election, 51% of voters voted by mail and 46% voted at the polls. (Early voting accounted for 2% and 3% of voters in the Primary and General elections respectively.)

Question – What if I prefer the experience of going to the polls?

Answer – If you are unconvinced of the convenience of voting early – by mail, then you still have the option to vote on Election Day. By choosing this method you are able to vote in your neighborhood and with only a fraction of the potential voters who can vote at an early voting site.

Question – How much money did Pinellas County save by eliminating remote early voting?

Answer – Eliminating remote early voting sites reduced costs by approximately \$250,000 per countywide election with the touchscreen voting system (\$25,000 per site). However, after changing to the optical scan voting system, early voting sites cost about \$61,000 each. In recent years we have reduced the cost to about \$38,000 per early voting site, and remote sites would cost about \$55,000 each. The Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners has required Appointing Authorities, which includes Constitutional Officers, to reduce their budgets every year since 2007 because of decreased property values and tax revenues. In summary, while election costs have increased steadily since 2000, the elections budget was reduced by 33.6% (\$2.38 million) since 2008. Early voting is not the only service affected by these cuts; service levels have been decreased across most county departments.

Question – Why did other counties choose to keep their remote early voting sites?

Answer – Each county has its own priorities and needs and is able to spend its revenues accordingly.

Question – Why not cut something else out of your budget?

Answer – Most of the Elections Office budget pays for functions and services that are **mandated by state law**. However, remote early voting sites are not required by law and are very expensive. In 2008 alone, we saved half a million dollars by eliminating remote early voting sites for two countywide elections – and the cost for remote sites has more than doubled since then.

Question – Does the Elections Office stand by its decision to eliminate remote early voting sites?

Answer – Absolutely yes. How can anyone be against a plan that provides easier access to ballots and reduces election costs?

The Elections Office is simply asking voters to trade one convenience for another. The decision to eliminate remote early voting sites was made after much deliberation and consideration for our voters. Even if we had unlimited funds, it still would not be right to continue spending taxpayers' money for something we know is not cost effective.

The Elections Office believes strongly that voting by mail is our voters' best option, and we encourage all elected officials, candidates and political parties to support our efforts.