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Statement by Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury
to the
House State Government Committee; June 4, 2008

Madame Chair, members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you today. You have provided me with an opportunity to discuss an issue that has been central to my nine years as Oregon's Secretary of State and has become a vital part of what it means to be an Oregonian.

Our primary last month put Oregon's vote-by-mail system in the national spotlight. We were pleased with the attention it received around the country and around the world. And once again we had a relatively smooth, highly participatory, fraud-free election.

The first question most people have about vote-by-mail is how the system works. You have before you sample ballots from our primary last month. These are typical of the packets voters received in the mail a couple of weeks before the election. We tried to be even-handed in what we gave you - some are Republican ballots, some are Democratic and some are non-partisan.

Let's take a look at this brief presentation that will explain the how voters vote and how election workers count the ballots.

(PDF presentation)

When you get right down to it, vote-by-mail isn't all that complicated. It's just absentee voting on a large scale.

I'd like to discuss with you Oregon's experience in getting the system up and running, I'd like to offer some tips for getting started and I'd like to make sure we have time to answer questions.

Oregon has found that vote-by-mail saves money, increases turnout and boosts voter confidence in elections. And nothing we do is more important than making sure voters have confidence in the way elections are run and votes are counted.

Elections are the way the public grants government the power to govern. And when the public loses confidence in elections it can quickly lose confidence in the legitimacy of government itself.

County elections offices eventually found that more than half the votes were being cast absentee. In other words, when people were given the choice to switch to vote-by-mail for themselves, a majority of them did so. Essentially, they wound up holding two elections: one at the polling place and one in the mail, for people who had already chosen to vote by mail all the time.

In Oregon, we solved this by putting vote-by-mail on the ballot, as I mentioned, where our voters overwhelmingly decided to move to all-mail elections.

Washington State had a similar experience, but dealt with it slightly differently. Soon after they adopted a permanent absentee option, a majority of voters there as well chose to vote by mail. But rather than move the entire state to mail voting, as we did in Oregon, Washington simply gave their counties the option to make the decision on their own.

By 2006, thirty-four of Washington's thirty-nine counties decided to move to all vote-by-mail elections. This year, all but one Washington county will hold their elections entirely by mail.

In 2002, California, the largest state in the Union, likewise gave voters the choice to sign up as a permanent mail voter. By 2006, an astounding 42% of all ballots cast in California were mail ballots.

By 2010 at the very latest, California will be a majority mail voting state. Counties there, thrilled with the success of increased mail voting, are already seeking permission to hold some of their elections entirely by mail.

Last year, Colorado also adopted permanent voter-choice mail voting, and we expect to see the same overwhelming move towards mail voting as we've seen everywhere else that it's been adopted.

The vote-by-mail system in Oregon really came of age in 1996 when we filled a vacancy in the U.S. Senate in an election conducted entirely by mail, our first statewide vote-by-mail election.

It's worth noting that on the day of that would have been the primary, had we held a polling place election, the state was hit by a massive windstorm. We were walloped by 90 mph winds that downed trees, closed roads and caused power outages in our major cities.

Had that been a polling place election, the storm would have had a devastating effect on turnout. But we were voting by mail.

The special Senate election was the only issue on the ballot and turnout was still a healthy 66 percent.

officials, and the postal system in those states insures that we are quickly moving towards a set of Best Practices.

I'd like to offer a few suggestions for things to consider as you move forward in your efforts.

- 1) Give people plenty of time to adjust to Vote-by-Mail. It's an entirely new system and voters and election workers will need to get used to it.
- 2) Allow permanent absentee voting with no excuse needed. It's a way for voters to voluntarily make the switch and adopt the system on their own schedule.
- 3) Don't let postmarks count. Make sure ballots have to be received at the county on election night, period. Postmarks often arrived smudged and illegible and only complicate election results. Remember that ballots can be dropped off at any county building or library right up until "poll closing" time.
- 4) Remember too that the post office is your partner. At 5 o'clock on election night, every post office conducts a sweep for remaining ballots and makes sure they're delivered.
- 5) Pay the postage due. We don't advertise this, but if there's any postage on an envelope at all, the counties will make up any shortfall. Poll tax? A stamp these days may well be cheaper than the gas needed to drive to a polling place.

At one time in our past, it made more sense to hold elections on Tuesday because that's when the farmers came to market. But things have changed and most 21st century lives are more complicated than that.

When you're juggling kids, jobs, homes and all the complexities of busy lives, it's not easy to hit that window to vote at a polling place, especially if you have to stand in line for a few hours. Vote by mail fits our modern lives.

It's fair to say Oregon lost something in this process. Voting is one of democracy's treasured civic rituals. We see our neighbors down at the church or the library or the schoolhouse.

We engage in an act of real public virtue. And maybe you get a little sticker than says, "I voted." It's sort of like the merit badge of democracy.

You don't mess with these traditions lightly.

But we have established a new kind of civic ceremony. It's a ceremony with a family sitting around the breakfast table filling out their ballots, reading through the voters pamphlet and learning about the candidates and the ballot measures.