

Department of Fiscal Services
Maryland General Assembly

FISCAL NOTE

Senate Bill 129 (Senator Miller)
Economic and Environmental Affairs

Election Law - Election By Mail

This bill authorizes local elections boards to conduct elections by mail. Each board must send an official ballot to each registered voter in its jurisdiction. The ballots must be mailed between the 14th and 20th days before the election. Upon request of a registered voter, a replacement ballot may be obtained from a board. The State Administrative Board of Election Laws (SABEL) must adopt regulations to administer elections by mail that are consistent with the current procedures for absentee ballots. In addition, SABEL must decertify voting systems that are not compatible with conducting elections by mail.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None. SABEL could develop regulations to administer mail-in elections and decertify voting systems with existing resources.

Local Effect: Indeterminate effect on county expenditures. No effect on revenues.

Small Business Effect: Potential minimal effect on small businesses as discussed below.

Fiscal Analysis

Local Expenditures: If a county chooses to conduct a mail-in election, its expenditures could be affected depending upon several factors, including the size of the jurisdiction, types of election, whether pre-election notices are mailed to the voters, the type of voting system currently used by the jurisdiction, and whether postage costs are paid by the elections board. The biggest savings appears to be in the costs of polling places and pollworkers. With a mail-in election, there is no need to rent any polling places, prepare or transport voting devices, and pay as many pollworkers. There could also be a minimal savings in printing costs because there is no need to print extra ballots with the expectation of a higher-than-

normal voter turnout at the polls. A ballot is only mailed to every eligible voter. In addition, based on national results, it appears as though mail-in elections may be more cost-effective in smaller jurisdictions than in larger jurisdictions. Generally, in precinct elections, larger jurisdictions have a lower cost per voter than smaller jurisdictions due to the large number of voters served by their polling places. However, under a mail-in election, larger jurisdictions lose their size advantage.

The biggest cost is postage and mailing the ballots. Other major costs include voter instructions, envelopes, and temporary workers.

The type of voting system a jurisdiction currently uses also impacts the cost-savings issue. It is possible that jurisdictions with mechanical lever voting machines would need to be upgraded to count mail-in ballots more efficiently and avoid possible decertification. Six jurisdictions in Maryland use such machines, including Baltimore City and Allegany, Caroline, Dorchester, Prince George's, and Somerset counties. These costs could be significant.

At this time, the actual impact on the local elections boards cannot be determined. It is likely that the smaller counties would experience a cost savings through mail-in elections, while the larger jurisdictions would experience an increase in costs. Several counties have estimated the costs of mail-in elections. Calvert County advises that a mail-in election would cost approximately \$68,000 or about the same as precinct elections. Howard County estimates that a mail-in election would cost \$185,800 based on 126,000 registered voters. This represents a savings of \$22,000 from precinct elections. Prince George's County advises a mail-in election would cost \$1.7 million, plus a one-time cost for voter education of \$708,400. Currently, the county spends approximately \$1.0 million per election. Baltimore City advises that the cost of a mail-in election in the city cannot be determined at this time.

Small Business Effect: Currently, there are six jurisdictions that use mechanical lever voting machines. These jurisdictions are Baltimore City and Allegany, Caroline, Dorchester, Prince George's, and Somerset counties. If these jurisdictions decide to conduct mail-in elections, it is possible that their voting systems would need to be upgraded, possibly to an optical scan system, in order to more efficiently count the ballots. However, to date, SABEL has not certified any Maryland businesses to provide such systems. The only certified system is provided by an out-of-state company. If a Maryland business is certified, it could experience an increase in its level of operations depending upon the number of contracts and their terms.

Additional Comments: Mail-in elections have produced mixed expenditure results throughout the U.S. Some jurisdictions experienced a savings versus traditional precinct elections, while others spent more money on mail-in elections. Examples of jurisdictions that

have conducted mail-in elections are the State of Oregon, Broward County (Florida), Stanislaus County (California), Washoe County (Nevada), and Clark County (Nevada). Oregon and Stanislaus County experienced a savings, while Washoe and Clark counties spent more on mail-in elections. Broward County experienced similar costs for both mail-in and precinct elections.

Information Source(s): State Administrative Board of Election Laws; Federal Election Commission; Baltimore City; Calvert, Howard, and Prince George's counties; Department of Fiscal Services

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