



PRESS RELEASE: Park County plans all-mail ballot, early voting for November election
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LIVINGSTON, Mont. — In light of ongoing concerns about Covid-19, Park County voters will see another all-mail election this November, according to the election plan released Tuesday.

In early October, the county will mail ballots to all active registered voters and open an official polling place in the elections office for early, in-person voting, said Maritza Reddington, Park County clerk and recorder and elections administrator.

“Having weighed all the voting options outlined by the governor last week and in light of the serious public-health concerns raised by the coronavirus pandemic, I have decided that voting in the general election should mimic those used in the successful June primary,” Reddington said. “This ensures a safe and secure election in Park County.”

All 56 Montana counties switched to mail-in ballots for the June 2 primary, which generated the highest voter turnout (nearly 55 percent) in a primary election statewide since voters were asked to ratify a new state constitution in 1970. In Park County, primary turnout this year was 56 percent, compared to 41 percent in 2018, and 44 percent in 2016.

“I informed the Park County Commission of the 2020 general election plan this morning,” Reddington said. *[A copy of the plan is attached.]* “State law gives the commission until Sept. 9 to object to the plan. But, as I told commissioners this morning, I am confident that this is the best solution for Park County in these unprecedented times.

“This plan protects the fundamental right to vote while reducing the potential for Covid-19 spread among crowds of voters, poll workers and election judges at in-person polling places. It also prevents potential problems that could ensue if a Covid-19 outbreak forced us to close or consolidate polling places at the last minute. Plus, you

don't even need a stamp. The state will cover return postage on all mail-in ballots," she said.

The health and safety of Park County's election judges was of particular concern as she weighed her options, Reddington said. Most of Montana's election judges over 60 years old, the demographic most vulnerable to the coronavirus, and would have to be sequestered in the polling places "for 12-15 hours" on Election Day, she said. Statewide, some judges have also expressed concerns about being "harassed or harmed" if they were charged with enforcing facemask and social-distancing rules at polling places.

Reddington's decision means:

— **Mail ballots** will be sent to all active registered voters in the county on Oct. 9, and must be back in the election office by 8 p.m. on Election Day, Nov. 3 to be counted.

— **Secure drop-off locations** will be set up, with locations to be announced at a later date.

— **Early in-person voting**, with ADA-compliant access and voting equipment, will be held at the elections office during regular business hours from Oct. 2 through Election Day (when hours expand to 7 a.m.- 8 p.m.).

— Voters will be able to see the **status of their ballot** (accepted, undeliverable or rejected) online at <https://app.mt.gov/voterinfo/>.

The governor's directive also extends the close of voter registration to Oct. 26. Applications received in the elections office by this date, or mailed applications postmarked by this date and received within three days, will be considered regular registrations, she said. Same-day registration will also be available on Election Day at the City-County Building. "You can register in person and receive a ballot at that time."

Park County will enforce social-distancing regulations among early voters, those registering to vote, and at designated ballot drop-off locations.

This plan lends itself to a faster turnaround of results.

"Park County has 13,169 registered voters, 7,214 of whom vote absentee, or 55 percent, so we are already typically processing more ballots in the office than what comes in from the polls," Reddington said. "A state law passed in 2019 allows us to begin 'Early Prep' three business days before the election. A board of eight elections judges work Thursday and Friday before the election prepping ballots for tabulation. This, too, has allowed us to have results much earlier than in the past."

The voting process remains "completely transparent," Reddington said. "Plus, the public is allowed and welcome to observe voting procedures." Those include:

— Public tests of all voting systems "before the election and again on Election Day

to ensure accuracy and functionality of our equipment,” she said.

— Onsite support from the county’s vendor, Elections Systems and Software of Nebraska, “which sends a representative to assist with the ballot counting process and troubleshoot if needed.”

— The state-mandated post-election audit. State officials select a random precinct and race for the county to hand count and compare those totals with the machine results. “The threshold for an unacceptable discrepancy is more than .5 percent of total ballots cast or 5 ballots, whichever is greater,” she explained.

For more information, please contact Park County Clerk and Recorder Maritza H. Reddington, 406.222.4110, clerkrecorder@parkcounty.org