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Mail-ballot elections secure *and* voter friendly, Park County elections administrator says

For more information: Call Maritza Reddington at (406) 222-4110 or email elections@parkcounty.org

LIVINGSTON, Mont. — Despite what you may have heard, voting by mail is safe, Park County Elections Administrator Maritza Reddington says, and it is the best option for holding a general election during these uncertain times.

In three weeks, on Oct. 9, Reddington’s office will mail ballots to Park County’s 11,781 active registered voters. For the majority of those voters, 64 percent, it will be business as usual. They already vote absentee, meaning they receive their ballots by mail and then either mail them back or drop them off at the county Elections Office, where they can get one of the coveted “I Voted” stickers.

“Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of Park County’s active voters cast absentee ballots, they voted by mail,” said Reddington, whose election duties are part of her job as Park County’s clerk and recorder. “I remain certain that a mail-ballot election is the safest, most secure way to proceed in the midst of a pandemic.

“There is NO evidence whatsoever that mail-ballot elections are more susceptible to fraud and tampering. In fact, mail-in voting fraud is extremely rare in this country. We have rigorous voter-identity controls in place to prevent against any such efforts. And it’s against federal law to cast a vote in the name of a dead person, for example, or someone who’s moved.”

As of Monday, Sept. 14, Park County had 13,334 registered voters. Of those, 11,781 are “active” voters. Reddington said that “64 percent of those active voters, 7,725 individuals, vote absentee. Of *all* registered voters, active and inactive, 56 percent are registered with an absentee status.”

The 2020 ballot contains numerous important races – for U.S. president,

Montana’s representatives in the U.S. House and Senate, governor, key state offices, and the Montana Legislature – and voter participation is expected to be high on Nov. 3. Turnout in June for the primary election, also conducted by mail, was the highest it had been in almost 50 years. In Park County, 56 percent of voters cast ballots.

“However, I recognize that this voting method is not universally supported,” Reddington said. “And because there has been so much national-level criticism and confusion – and, frankly, bad information – surrounding mail ballots, I want to make three quick points.

“One, Montana has been conducting mail-ballot elections for over 20 years and has robust, time-tested laws that govern mail-ballot elections. Two, Park County’s own detailed mail-ballot processes have been finely tuned and tested. And three, the best information about elections processes and procedures is found at local level. Other states have their own, often different, election laws and procedures. I urge voters to focus on Park County-specific election information and Montana’s election laws,” she said.

Park County’s mail-ballot election processes include, but are not limited to:

- Daily updates to/maintenance of voter rolls to ensure only qualified voters receive a mail ballot.
- Ballots are secured with tamper-resistant seals.
- A documented paper trail is created and maintained for each ballot.
- The outgoing and return envelopes have specific barcodes on them, which alert the U.S. Postal Service that the package contains a ballot or a vote, and which are also linked to individual voter records. An “Official Election Mail” logo is also printed on outgoing and return envelopes.
- When a ballot is returned, trained staff compare the signature on the return “affirmation” envelope with the voter’s record. If they don’t match, the ballot is flagged and verification steps ensue.
- All voters can now track their ballots online and, if *they* see problems, notify elections officials immediately.

In the weeks since announcing the election plan for Park County, Reddington has received numerous inquiries. She has compiled a list of the most frequently asked questions. Those questions, and her responses, are listed below.

“My hope is that clarifying some of the misconceptions and reassuring all voters that the process is safe builds further confidence in the process,” she said.

Aren't mail-ballot elections more susceptible to fraud? No. In reality, mail/absentee ballots have an even greater level of fraud prevention than polling-place ballots. Specifically, when a ballot is returned, the signature on the return "affirmation" envelope is compared to signatures on file for that voter. That happens before the ballot can be counted. If the signature does not match, the ballot is rejected as a "signature mismatch," and the Elections Office tries to reach the voter (example attached).

By comparison, at a polling place, a voter must sign the register when receiving a ballot, but there is no comparison of that signature to any other exhibit of that voter's signature.

What about mail ballots sent to dead people? A critical part of my job is to ensure and maintain the accuracy of voter rolls. That includes ongoing cross-checks of registered voters against all legal confirmations of deaths in Park County. Montana's Department of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of State's Office maintain and forward year-to-date death lists. And our Park County Clerk and Recorder's office maintains vital records for the county, including all births and deaths.

In the unlikely event that a ballot is sent to a deceased voter, it is typically returned by the family with notations that the voter has passed away. However, as mentioned above, the signature verification serves as a further check against fraud.

What about when people move? Can't new residents just vote the ballot that arrives in the mail?

No. It is against the law to vote a ballot that is not addressed to you, by name.

Park County's voter rolls are regularly checked against the National Change of Address (NCOA). If a registered voter has moved within the county, they get a letter to clarify their correct address [example attached] and the registration is updated. If they have moved out of county, the registration is removed. Montana has strict laws for maintaining voter rolls (online at https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0020/part_0020/section_0200/0130-0020-0020-0200.html).

Furthermore, instructions on mail ballots explicitly state: "Do not sign for another person. Failure to sign may invalidate your ballot. If your signature does not match your signatures on file, the ballot may be rejected."

Why can't I vote in person? You can. All registered voters are welcome to vote in person at the Election Office beginning Oct. 2 and right up through Election Day, Nov. 3.

In an all-mail-ballot election, do I have to MAIL my ballot back for it to be counted? No, even though return postage is provided, you can hand-deliver your ballot to the Election Office in the City-County Building, 414 E. Callender Street in Livingston. The office will be open and accepting ballots until 8 p.m. on Election Day.

We have also set up four other secure, staffed ELECTION-DAY ballot drop-off locations, which will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

- St. Margaret's Catholic Church (Hall): 206 5th Ave. Clyde Park, MT 59018
- Park County Fairgrounds (dining room): 46 View Vista Drive, Livingston, MT 59047
- Emigrant Hall: 101 Story Road, Emigrant, MT 59027
- Gardiner School: 510 Stone Street, Gardiner, MT 59030

At 8 p.m., law-enforcement officers will collect the secure ballot boxes and deliver them to the Election Office in Livingston.

If I do mail it back, what's the deadline? Montana law requires ballots be in election offices by 8 p.m. Election Day, not postmarked by that day. If you are mailing your completed ballot, don't wait until the last minute. To ensure on-time delivery, the U.S. Postal Service recommends, in Montana, that you post your ballot *at least one week before Election Day*, or no later than Oct. 27.

Are ballots "mass mailed" in a mail ballot election? No. The Elections Office uses a single database to distribute election materials: voter rolls. It never conducts so-called "mass mailings." In all-mail elections, all active registered voters on the rolls are sent a ballot.

Inactive voters are not sent ballots. Voters become inactive when (1) they fail to vote in a federal general election, (2) a mail ballot is returned to the election office as "undeliverable," and (3) they do not respond to subsequent confirmation mailings.

To find your registration status, visit the "My Voter Page," the Montana secretary of state's voter-information service at <https://app.mt.gov/voterinfo/>.

Is it too late to register? No. The first step is to fill out the Montana Voter Registration Application, which can be found online at https://sosmt.gov/Portals/142/Elections/Forms/Voter_Registration_Application.pdf or by calling the Election Office (222-4110). Then return the completed, signed application to the county Election Office by Oct. 26 via mail, email, fax or in person. After that, from Oct. 27 through Nov. 3, registration must be done at the Election Office.

* Acceptable forms of ID include: A copy of a current photo ID showing your name (including but not limited to a valid driver's license, a school district or postsecondary education photo identification, or a tribal photo identification), **OR** A copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, notice of confirmation of voter registration, government check, or other government document that shows your name and current address.

How do I know you got my ballot? After casting a ballot, voters can track its status (accepted, undeliverable or rejected) online at <https://app.mt.gov/voterinfo/>.

SIDEBAR/IMPORTANT DATES

Oct. 2: Early in-person voting, with ADA-compliant access and voting equipment, begins at the Elections Office during regular business hours.

Oct. 9: Mail ballots sent to all *active* registered voters in the county.

Oct 27: Beginning of late voter registration. In-person registration continues through 8 pm on Election Day.

Nov. 3: Election Day: To be counted, all ballots must be returned by mail, delivered in person, or dropped off at secure ballot-collection points by 8 p.m. Elections Office hours expand to 7 a.m.- 8 p.m. for voter registration and in-person voting. Drop-off locations open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.