THERE’S ONLY ONE WAY TO DESCRIBE THIS ELECTION: HISTORIC

By Phil McGrane

I’m writing to you from what we affectionately call the “Bunker.” The Bunker is the base from which, under normal circumstances, we coordinate the massive undertaking that is required to pull off an election at hundreds of polling places, each processing hundreds, if not thousands, of voters. Elections Offices are effectively the largest event planning operations in any given community. In Ada County, running an election is like hosting an event with 265,000 of our closest friends and neighbors all across 151 polling locations with all of the associated logistics of supplies, staffing, parking etc. Hence why we need a bunker. Months of methodical planning and preparation goes into pulling off each election to ensure every vote is counted and the experience is smooth for voters.

As you likely know by now, the circumstances surrounding this election are anything but “normal.” There are no polling places, no poll workers, and for the first time, we are collectively voting from home. (Whether you might want to or not.)

This election is not simply different from past elections. This election is nothing short of historic. That’s not merely due to the unique circumstances we all find ourselves in as a result of the coronavirus. It also describes the election itself. When the deadline for candidate filing arrived in early March, this looked like any other primary election. Notwithstanding some open seats and a few school bonds or levies, there were few headline races drawing much attention. Under “normal” conditions, turnout would have likely been low, between 20-30% statewide, and only a fraction of those voters would have been mailed a ballot. The effort to conduct the election would have matched the turnout.

Now, for the first time, all Idahoans will be voting by mail. That is noteworthy in and of itself. The state legislature has long shown a strong preference for the tradition of voting in person at the voting booth, imbued with its significance and history. Yet, what is more surprising, and historic, is the turnout of this election. Counties have already issued more ballots for this primary than any other primary in the State’s history, and we still have a few more days to go. This election is surpassing years when the President and Governor were on the ballot and turnout is usually highest. (Sorry Governor Little.)

The effort to pull off this election has been historic too. While our healthcare workers are on the front lines ensuring our safety in the midst of this novel virus, clerks across the state feel like we’re on the front lines of a different kind of battle, working days, nights and weekends to ensure we all of the opportunity to vote regardless of the hurdles.

With only a few days’ notice, clerks throughout Idaho were asked to pivot and do this election all by mail. You may be thinking, “That does not sound so bad, other states do it.” However, what we are undertaking is both
challenging and unprecedented without the resources, infrastructure, and most importantly, the luxury of time and deliberate planning that other states have under “normal” circumstances. This election, the bunker has proven to be insufficient for the task at hand. Instead of managing polls and relying on an army of civically motivated poll workers, we are racing daily to keep up with the mail that can contain tens of thousands of requests and ballots each needing to be handled and processed one-by-one.

As with all events, planning is the key to success. For example, early in the process, counties, like Canyon, began running into envelope shortages. Much like toilet paper these days, ballot envelopes are difficult to obtain, as other states have also been switching to mail elections. In Ada County, in spite of having ordering twenty thousand more envelopes than the total turnout for any primary in history, we still ran out and had to order more. All of that came after we had already set aside the existing supplies we normally utilize, so that we could get new envelopes, instructions and the like printed with new deadlines and prepaid postage for this unique election. On numerous days over the course of this election, we have mailed more ballots in one day than we typically would in an entire election. Moreover, like so many others, we’re juggling how we process all of those ballots and requests all while maintaining social distance and working to keep all of our dedicated workers safe.

The good news is, we’re getting it done. That is what clerks do. As the numbers show, a record number of ballots are going out, even if it isn’t as quickly as we all might like. Thankfully, there is extra time to get them back after Election Day. The June 2nd deadline for ballots to be returned helps ensure that even if you haven’t received your ballot yet, you can still get it, vote, and return it in time to have your voice be heard. As we work through the next few weeks to get the final ballots out and to get every vote in, signature checked, and ballot counted we ask for your support and patience during this historic undertaking.

If you haven’t already, be part of something historic and visit Idahovotes.gov to request your ballot today! And, when you’re done, don’t forget to wash your hands.

(See Graphics Below)

Phil McGrane was elected as the Ada County Clerk in 2018 and has been involved in running elections in Idaho since 2005.
One day's worth of ballots returned to Ada County on May 12th.