UPDATE ON THE MASON COUNTY VERIFIED VOTER PILOT PROJECT

I want to update citizens on the pilot project to replace voter signatures with date of birth and driver's license number or state identification card number for ballot authentication. Mason County will use this method in the April 28, 2026, Special Election only, not the February Special Election as previously reported. This will allow for use a more cost-effective solution. The Office of Secretary of State approved this project according to RCW 29A.40.111, which allows counties to employ pilot projects for development and testing of alternative methods to signature verification. The Legislature passed this law in response to lawsuits filed by the League of United Latin American Citizens and Latino Community Fund of Washington in Yakima, Benton, and Chelan counties alleging their signature verification processes violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965. According to the complaint, Latino voters in these three counties were several times more likely to get their ballot rejected due to a mismatched signature. These suits were settled out of court. With that, the legislature sought to explore signature verification alternatives.

Use of a voter's date of birth and either their Washington state driver's license number or Washington state identification card number on the ballot return envelope provides a fully objective authentication method. The intent of the pilot project is to ensure accurate and reliable ballot authentication free of subjective interpretation or any potential for human bias; reduce the number of ballots typically rejected in an election; enhance election security; safeguard voter privacy; and maintain statutory compliance. This method also reduces barriers for voters with signature consistency challenges, including young adults who have not developed a signature (and have comparatively high ballot rejection rates), as well as voters with cognitive or physical impairments.

The Verified Voter Pilot Project introduces a privacy focused, postage paid return envelope with a removable tab that provides voter anonymity and safeguards all voter information until the ballot reaches the Elections Department where trained staff will remove the tab. Use of this ballot return envelope will not result in additional election costs for districts.

Participation in the Verified Voter Pilot Project is optional and voluntary. For participating voters, the Verified Voter process replaces traditional signature verification. The Elections Department will accept ballots when the voter's date of birth and the identification number on their Washington state driver's license or state identification card match the information in the voter registration database. If this information is missing, standard signature verification procedures will be followed. If the information is incorrect, ballot "cure" procedures will be followed. Signatures are still required to affirm voter eligibility. Additional voter data provided will be securely processed and remain exempt from public disclosure. Districts may opt out of the project by petitioning the Board of County Commissioners for a waiver. The county will honor those requests.

I want to ensure the sanctity of the voting rights of every eligible citizen. The Verified Voter Pilot Project is intended to provide higher fidelity ballot authentication to what many believe is an excellent system.

Steve Duenkel
Mason County Auditor