

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1236

As Reported By House Committee On:

Government Operations

Title: An act relating to processing of incoming absentee ballots.

Brief Description: Expediting processing of absentee ballots.

Sponsors: Representatives Reams, R. Fisher, Talcott, Thompson, D. Schmidt, Huff, Scott, Regala, Costa, Robertson and Conway; by request of Secretary of State.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Government Operations: 2/15/95, 2/24/95 [DPS].

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Reams, Chairman; Goldsmith, Vice Chairman; Hargrove; Honeyford; Hymes; Mulliken; D. Schmidt and Van Luvan.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives L. Thomas, Vice Chairman; Rust, Ranking Minority Member; Scott, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chopp; R. Fisher; Sommers and Wolfe.

Staff: Bill Lynch (786-7092).

Background: Each absentee voter receives a ballot, a security envelope in which to seal the ballot after voting, and a larger return envelope in which to return the security envelope. The return envelope provides space for the voter to indicate the date on which the ballot was voted and for the voter to sign an oath that he or she has not voted in any other jurisdiction at this election.

The return envelopes may be opened and processed on or after the 10th day prior to the primary or election. The opening of the security envelopes and tabulation of absentee ballots may not begin until after 8:00 pm on the day of the primary or election.

After the return envelopes are opened, the county canvassing board must place all the ballot envelopes in containers that can be secured with numbered seals. The sealed

containers must be stored in a secure location until after 8:00 pm on the day of the primary or election.

Absentee ballots that will be tabulated electronically may be taken from the inner envelopes and all normal procedural steps performed to prepare the ballots for tabulation before sealing the containers.

The law is silent about when the verification of signatures may commence.

Summary of Substitute Bill: The verification of signatures may begin on or after the 10th day prior to the primary or the election.

The return and security envelopes may not be opened until 8:00 pm on the day of the primary or election. The authority to take absentee ballots that will be tabulated electronically and prepare them for tabulation before 8:00 pm on election day is removed.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: The original bill allowed absentee ballots that would be tallied electronically to be fed into the equipment, so long as this process did not produce election returns before 8:00 pm.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not Requested.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: (substitute bill): The right to vote is critical. Ballot secrecy must be protected. Quick election returns are not as important as preserving the integrity of elections.

Testimony Against: (substitute): The percentage of people voting by absentee ballot continues to increase, and is as high as 40 percent in some counties. Some elections are entirely conducted by mail. Local auditors need time to process ballots including making sure that they will go through the machine. Sufficient safeguards already exist.

Testified: Bob Terwilliger, Snohomish County Auditor; Cathy Pearsall Stipek, Pierce County Auditor; Eleanor Ballasiotes, citizen; Dale Washam citizen; Dr. Kathleen Skrinar; Joan Charles, King County; San Reed, Thurston County Auditor; Julie Miller, Pierce County Absentee Supervisor; Ralph Munroe, Secretary of State; Jodi Dionne, Duane Schooley, United We Stand American of Washington; Robert Lauver, 9th Congressional District, United We Stand; Doug Cochran, Yakima County

Auditor; Karen Flynn, Kitsap County Auditor; and John Charles, King County Records and Elections.