

Oregon's vote-by-mail system should include paid return postage

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(Photo: DANIELLE PETERSON / Statesman Journal)

Oregon has required its electorate to vote by mail since an initiative was passed by voters in 1998. But Oregonians, who have the option to "cast" their ballots at an official drop site on Election Day, have had to pony up the postage the past 19 years to participate in democracy.

Two lawmakers last week decided it was time to end that inequity, and we agree enthusiastically.

Oregon has reduced the cost of its elections for nearly two decades and increased the time available for workers to tally votes and get results dispatched in a timely fashion.

Despite the program's success, (Washington state and Colorado followed Oregon's lead and others are considering it), the state is still "charging" Oregon residents to vote.

Today's "forever" stamps cost 49 cents each.

Currently costs 49 cents to vote in an Oregon election

This might not seem like a financial barrier to many of us, but it could be a reason why those living on fixed or low incomes, especially in households with multiple members, forget to vote.

The Statesman Journal's story about the bill online attracted numerous commenters who wrote that if 49 cents is too much to pay, folks should just get off their hindquarters (a polite interpretation) and "take their ballots down to a drop-off site."

But this option isn't always possible for those living with disabilities, or in skilled-care homes or for whom transportation is an issue. There are far fewer drop-off sites in the Mid-Valley today than former polling places.

Senators Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, and Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin, introduced Senate Bill 683 to shift the limited financial responsibility for voting to the state. The bill would require business-class postage to be affixed to ballot return envelopes to ensure that if the envelope isn't used, the state won't be charged.

Earmarked for elections held after Jan. 1, 2019, the cost to the state to provide free postage would be about \$300,000 for the 2017-2019 budget cycle and about \$1.3 million for each 2-year budget after that.


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Devlin said the purpose of the bill is to increase voter participation. "If this legislation were to lead to a 5 or even 10-percent increase in voter turnout, then I believe this expenditure of public dollars will be very well spent."

Some call this a waste of taxpayer money at a time when the state is looking to fill a gaping budget deficit of \$1.6 billion.

But getting a disenfranchised voter to cast his or her vote is not nonsense.

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