

Legislative Report, December 8, 2015
Representative Rick Holman, ND District 20.

Just last week, I attended a meeting which consisted of the Secretary of State Al Jaeger, members of his staff, several legislators, and members from the Cass, Burleigh, and Stutsman County Auditor's offices. I had hoped that low population counties would have been present but because the Auditors in those counties have multiple responsibilities, elections being one, it's harder for them to attend. The discussion was about the need for replacement of voting equipment that has handled the state's elections for many years. The Secretary of State's goal is to find a way to update and replace the equipment in time for the 2018 election, no small task. In concert with the state, fifty-three unique counties must administer the elections and bring together the results, efficiently, accurately and securely while maintaining the anonymity of each individual voter.

Technology is changing our world. Using it to assist in elections is a challenge. Will we someday be voting with our smartphone or computer? We trust the use of technology for our bank records and for our medical records. I activate my smart phone with my thumbprint. Recently, I laid my passport on a scanner in the MSP airport, and the machine compared my passport photo to a new photo of me. How can we use technology and the Internet to assist in the voting process? With banking and medical records, a trusted professional is able to see the data and your name. In voting, no other person is allowed to see how you vote.

My experience with mail balloting shows how we currently maintain that separation. You place your ballot in a security envelope that does not identify you and that envelope is placed in another envelope which is used to check off your name in the voter file. In step two, another person opens the security envelope and runs the ballot through the machine. The person seeing the ballot does not see the name of the person who filled out the ballot.

In Traill County where I live, County Auditor Becca Braaten and her staff do a great job of administering elections, with polling places at Mayville and Hillsboro on election day, with mail balloting starting about six weeks before election day, and absentee balloting which can be done at Hillsboro any time during the six weeks prior to election day. Results are obtained quickly and accurately.

Cass County, our largest county has a more complex issue due to population. With multiple polling places, thousands of voters and over a hundred different ballot forms, the added complexity of the election in a high population county was made clear. We saw a warehouse full of voting equipment. It made me ask, what do they do in New York or Chicago? Voting needs to be uncomplicated, and access must be easy. How can we keep that in our state while adjusting to the age of technology?

A disappointment in the meeting last week in Fargo as well as an earlier national meeting in Santa Fe, NM was the absence of officials from counties with small populations. Thirty-four of our fifty-three counties vote predominately by mail with polling at the county seat on Election Day. The larger counties have early voting sites where any county resident can vote at several sites the week before Election Day. The cost of that convenience in counties like Traill or Steele makes it not viable. I would hope that in the next legislative session when election issues related to equipment and voting are discussed, that a variety of stakeholders come forward in order to find a solution that is good for the state, the county and, most importantly, the voter. If everyone is involved we will most likely find a solution that works for all North Dakota voters.
Rep. Rick Holman.