



# Ohio Legislative Service Commission

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## Fiscal Note & Local Impact Statement

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**Bill:** Am. Sub. H.B. 260 of the 128th G.A.

**Date:** January 6, 2010

**Status:** As Passed by the House

**Sponsor:** Reps. Stewart and Heard

**Local Impact Statement Procedure Required:** Yes

**Contents:** To make various election law changes

### Overview

The bill makes numerous changes to Ohio's election law. Because the changes are numerous, the provisions with the greatest fiscal effect, either cost savings or cost increases for the state and political subdivisions, are highlighted in the bullet points below. The detailed analysis that follows these highlights elaborates on these provisions and identifies other changes that have lesser or uncertain fiscal effects for the state and political subdivisions.

### State Fiscal Highlights

- **Ballot wording limit.** The bill limits the number of words of a ballot issue to 300, potentially resulting in lower ballot advertising costs paid from Secretary of State line item 050621, Statewide Ballot Advertising within the Statewide Ballot Advertising Fund (Fund 5FH0). The source of funding for this line item is transfers from the Uniform Commercial Code Filing Fund (Fund 5990).
- **State agency voter registration responsibilities and mandatory voter registration.** The bill requires the Secretary of State to enter into a memorandum of understanding with various state agencies to perform certain voter registration duties, and also gives private citizens the ability to initiate a mandamus action with the Ohio Supreme Court if it is believed that one of these agencies is failing to meet voter registration obligations. This could result in some litigation costs to these agencies to defend any such actions. The bill also requires all individuals that are qualified electors to be registered to vote. There could be some cost increases to entities responsible for registering these individuals.
- **Online voter registration.** The bill requires the Secretary of State to establish a secure Internet web site to permit individuals to submit voter registration applications or changes. There would be some new costs associated with developing this site.
- **Absent voter free access system.** The bill requires the Secretary of State to develop a free access system whereby any person can determine the status of the person's

absent voter's ballot request, completed absent voter's ballot, and whether the person's absent voter's ballot was counted. There will be costs to both the Secretary of State's office and to county boards of elections for the development and implementation of this system.

- **Poll worker shifts.** The bill requires each county board of elections to adopt a policy to either allow or disallow split shift schedules for any precinct election officials other than the presiding judge of an election. This could lead to increased GRF poll worker training costs that the Secretary of State reimburses to counties through appropriation item 050407, Poll Worker Training.
- **Joint Task Force on Special Elections and Cost Reductions.** The bill creates the Joint Task Force on Special Elections and Cost Reductions, comprised of members of the General Assembly, representatives from the Office of the Secretary of State, representatives from local government associations, election officials, and members of the public. The bill requires the Task Force to study the timing and conduct of special elections for the purpose of developing recommendations to unify special election dates, and to examine opportunities to reduce the cost of election administration.

## **Local Fiscal Highlights**

- **Elections costs.** The bill reapportions the costs of elections between counties and other political subdivisions by expanding the costs that are paid by local subdivisions. In addition to paying the costs for conducting the election, subdivisions will also be required to pay any costs incurred for the preparation of the election, such as any compensation costs for overtime worked by a board of elections in preparation for the election, and depreciation costs of voting machines.
- **Required county board of elections reports.** The bill requires that after the certification of an election, each county board of elections submit to the Secretary of State any statistics or information regarding that particular election that the Secretary of State requires. A process similar to this occurs currently in accordance with a Secretary of State directive, so it is not clear whether this provision would add new costs.
- **Mandatory voter registration.** The bill requires that by August 1, 2012, all individuals who meet the qualifications of an elector and do any of the following automatically be registered to vote: graduate from a public, private, or community high school, register or update their service with a designated agency, apply for, or renew, or update a driver's license or state identification card. Presumably school districts would be responsible for registering qualified high school students.
- **Validity of provisional ballots.** The bill sets out the criteria for determining the validity of a provisional ballot. Should it be determined that the ballot is valid, and to be counted, and the individual is registered to vote in a precinct that is different than the precinct in which the provisional ballot was cast, the bill requires the board

of elections to remake the provisional ballot on a ballot that is appropriate for that precinct, and count those issues and races for which the voter was eligible to vote. This provision could result in increased costs to boards of elections to verify and remake all valid provisional ballots cast.

- **Early voting.** The bill increases the number of possible locations at which a board of elections may permit absent voter's ballots to be cast in person from one to four and reduces the time in which in-person absentee voting may take place to 21 days. The reduction in early voting time before an election should result in decreased costs to counties.
- **Provisional ballot costs.** The bill changes the definition of "jurisdiction" from precinct to county, which allows individuals to cast a provisional ballot anywhere in the county in which they are registered. This provision could increase the number of provisional ballots cast in an election. Generally, it costs boards of elections more money to verify and count provisional ballots.
- **Ballot supplies purchasing program.** The bill requires the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) to establish a purchasing program through which the Department enters into purchase contracts for supplies used by boards of elections, including any required polling place supplies. If DAS can acquire these supplies through its contracts at a cheaper rate than each individual county, this would reduce some supply costs to county boards of elections.
- **Ballot priority contracts – public notice.** The bill increases the cost of ballot printing contracts that a board of elections may enter into without publishing notice and without requiring a bond from \$10,000 to \$25,000. Assuming that counties would select the most cost effective printing bid available, this provision could reduce advertising costs to some counties.
- **Ballot printing.** The bill establishes a minimum number of ballots to be prepared for each election, including mandatory numbers of on demand ballots, in which the number of ballots prepared varies depending on the type of election being conducted, and, in specific cases, the voter turnout in prior similar elections, and permits additional ballots to be printed at the discretion of the board of elections. This could lead to greater ballot printing costs.
- **Elections by mail.** The bill permits a board of elections of a county to conduct certain elections held within the county by mail. This includes (1) a special election held on a day other than the day of a primary or general election as authorized by a municipal or county charter, (2) an election to fill a vacancy in a nomination for Congressional representative or a vacancy in the office of Congressional representative, and (3) any election at which no nominations for or elections to office appear on the ballot are all permitted to be held by mail. In these cases, the political subdivision would experience cost savings through elections by mail versus operating polling places. However, the number of instances in which this provision would be applicable is seemingly minimal.

- **County vote centers.** The bill permits the Secretary of State to implement a pilot project to evaluate the use of county vote centers for general elections for state and county office in the year 2010 as an alternative to operating precinct polling places. A county vote center is a polling location at which any person registered to vote in a county may appear to cast a ballot on the day of the general election, regardless of the location of the precinct within the county in which the person resides. This provision would presumably reduce staffing and other related election costs associated with conducting elections at individual polling places.
- **Electronic transmission of absent voter ballots.** The bill permits the Secretary of State to implement a pilot project to evaluate the effectiveness and reliability of transmitting unvoted absent voter's ballots and unvoted armed service absent voter's ballots by secure electronic transmission to eligible voters. If implemented permanently, sending such ballots through electronic transmission could reduce mailing costs to counties.

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## **Detailed Fiscal Analysis**

The bill makes numerous changes to different facets of the election law. These changes and their state and local fiscal effects have been grouped into various categories and are discussed below. Please consult the LSC bill analysis for further detail on these and other provisions.

### **Election administration**

#### **Establishment of election precincts**

The bill requires boards of elections, whenever there are any changes to precinct boundaries or numbers, or any changes to the location of polling places, to notify the Secretary of State's Office within five days of the changes being approved by the board, instead of the 45 days that is in current law. The bill does not make any changes to the manner in which these notifications would be made. Therefore, any additional costs related to the shortening of these deadlines would be minimal.

#### **Allocation of voting machines**

The bill alters the process by which a county board of elections determines the allocation and distribution of voting machines and equipment. The board is required to use a different set of criteria identified in the bill, and then post the proposed distribution plan at the board of elections, and on the board's web site, for public comment. Once the public comment period is complete, the full board must vote to approve the distribution plan. Generally, the new criteria used under the bill could allow a board of elections to distribute machines differently than in the past, possibly allocating them in such a fashion as to reduce the wait to vote. If this should happen, it could prevent polls from having to stay open longer, which would in turn reduce overtime costs in some cases.

#### **Apportionment of election costs**

The bill reapportions the costs of elections between counties and other political subdivisions. The expenses of a board of elections are paid for from the county treasury just as other expenses. However, the costs of conducting elections in odd-numbered years, such as the cost of renting polling places, and the costs of placing and removing ballot boxes, are charged to the subdivisions holding elections. The bill expands the costs that are paid by local subdivisions. In addition to paying the costs for conducting the election, subdivisions will also be required to pay any costs incurred for the preparation of the election, such as any compensation costs for overtime worked by a board of elections.

The bill requires the Secretary of State to create a uniform cost depreciation schedule for all voting machines, and requires this amount to be charged to applicable political subdivisions. Political subdivisions currently do not pay any depreciation costs as part of their election cost apportionment. Also, it would appear as if political

subdivisions would be responsible for depreciation costs for machines that may not even be used in a particular election. The bill also requires a board of county commissioners to establish an Elections Revenue Fund, and permits the board to establish an Elections Capital Improvement Fund. The bill also requires that any political subdivision seeking to hold a special election pay 65% of the costs of that election up front. Under current law, the political subdivision, while having to pay the entire cost of the special election, does not pay anything up front.

### **Poll worker split shifts**

The bill requires each county board of elections to adopt a policy to either allow or disallow split shift schedules for any precinct election officials other than the presiding judge of an election. The bill also specifies that poll workers that work a split shift must be paid a percentage of poll worker pay, based upon the hours worked. Generally, this provision would not result in any additional poll worker pay costs to counties. However, by allowing split shifts for poll workers, it is possible that a larger number of poll workers could need training, which could increase costs to the Secretary of State's Office. Typically, the Secretary of State reimburses counties for poll worker training costs after the county files an expense statement with the office. These reimbursements are paid from the Secretary of State's GRF appropriation item 050407, Poll Worker Training.

### **Ballot printing requirements and marking instruction cards**

The bill sets out a minimum number of ballots to be prepared for each election, including on demand ballots in applicable counties, in which the number of ballots prepared varies depending on the type of election being conducted, and, in specific cases, the voter turnout in prior similar elections, and permits additional ballots to be printed at the discretion of the board of elections. It is possible that the minimum numbers established in the bill would be greater than the number of ballots that a county board of elections would print for a given election, thereby resulting in an increase in ballot printing costs.

Boards of elections are required to have printed instruction cards for guiding electors in marking their ballots. The bill revises the information that must appear on these cards. If boards of elections do not typically print out new instruction cards for polling places in each election, then there could be some minimal costs for printing new instruction cards.

### **Required county board of elections reports**

The bill requires that after the certification of an election, each county board of elections submit to the Secretary of State any statistics or information regarding that particular election that the Secretary of State requires. This report is required to contain the following information: (1) the number of registered voters eligible to cast a ballot in that election, (2) the total number of ballots cast and ballots counted, (3) the number of provisional ballots cast prior to election day, the reason a provisional ballot was

received by the voter, the number of provisional ballots cast on election day, and the number of provisional ballots counted and not counted, and the reason why they were not counted, (4) the number of absent voter's ballots requested in-person, the number of such ballots provided, the number of such ballots cast, and the number of such ballots counted, not counted, and the reason why they were not counted, (5) the number of absent voter's ballots requested by mail, the number of such ballots provided, the number of such ballots cast, and the number of such ballots counted and not counted, and (6) the number of armed service absent voter's ballots requested, the number provided, the number cast, and the number of such ballots counted or not counted. A process similar to this occurs currently in accordance with a Secretary of State directive. However, because directives for individual elections do not necessarily carry over to the next election, this provision would result in a new cost to counties.

### **Elections during a state of emergency**

The bill requires the Secretary of State to promulgate rules on how to conduct elections during a declared state of emergency and requires counties to submit emergency plans to the Secretary of State based upon those rules. There would be some minimal costs associated with this provision for both the Secretary of State and county boards of elections.

## **Qualifications for specified activities under election law**

### **Qualifications of an elector**

The bill revises the qualifications needed to be an elector. Under the bill, a person is qualified to be an elector if the person "will have been a resident" for 30 days by the day of the election and the person "will have been registered to vote" for 30 days by the day of the election. Additionally, the bill eliminates the provision that a person reside in the precinct in which the person offers to vote. Eliminating this provision could ultimately result in an increased number of provisional ballots (see **Casting of a Provisional Ballot** for detailed fiscal impact).

## **Voter registration**

### **Voter registration at designated agencies**

#### **Background**

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) requires each state to designate agencies for the registration of voters for federal office. Designated voter registration agencies must include (1) all offices in the state that provide public assistance and (2) all offices in the state that provide state-funded programs primarily engaged in providing services to persons with disabilities. In addition to these agencies, NVRA requires each state to designate other offices within the state as voter registration agencies; those agencies may include various state or local government offices or federal and nongovernmental offices. The designated state agencies in Ohio are the Department of Job and Family Services, Department of Health, Department of

Mental Health, the Department of Developmental Disabilities, the Rehabilitation Services Commission, and state-assisted colleges or universities that provide services to disabled students.

The bill designates the Secretary of State as the chief elections official who coordinates Ohio's responsibilities under the NVRA provisions described above. Not later than 120 days after the effective date of this provision, or 120 days after an agency is deemed to be a designated agency, the Secretary of State is required to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the head of those state agencies for the purpose of prescribing a general program for registering voters or updating voter registration information.

The bill also creates a process for the Secretary of State, an individual, or the head of a state agency with supervisory authority over a designated agency to effect compliance with the Voter Registration Law. Under the bill, an individual may initiate a mandamus action before the Ohio Supreme Court if a designated agency fails to enter into the required memorandum of understanding, or correct any deficiency in compliance with the Voter Registration Law within 45 days of receiving written notice of the deficiency by the individual. This could potentially result in some mandamus filings with the Ohio Supreme Court, stemming from private individuals being given this authority under the bill. While the number of such claims arising from the bill is uncertain, it is possible that both designated state agencies and county offices could experience some cost increases associated with litigating any such claims.

### **Mandatory voter registration**

The bill requires that by August 1, 2012, all individuals who meet the qualifications of an elector and do any of the following automatically be registered to vote: graduate from a public, private, or community high school, register or update their service with a designated agency, apply for, or renew, or update a driver's license or state identification card. The bill does allow for an individual to opt out of automatic voter registration. The Secretary of State is also required to enter into a memorandum of understanding with all applicable entities to conduct this registration process.

According to Secretary of State voter registration files, there are approximately 8.2 million registered voters in Ohio. The overall estimated population of Ohio that is of voting age is approximately 8.8 million. This would mean that there are approximately 600,000 individuals that are qualified but unregistered voters. Additionally, there are approximately 131,000 students that graduate from high school (public and private) each year. Presumably, under the bill, the local school districts would be responsible for registering these individuals to vote and could incur some costs for doing so.

### **Change of address and change of name**

Under current law, a voter who moves between precincts, between counties, or who changes his or her name must update the person's voter registration and vote a



provisional ballot. The bill permits such a voter who moves within a county to cast a regular ballot at the board of elections, at an in-person absent voting location, or at the voter's precinct polling place under specified conditions. Generally, this provision would reduce the number of provisional ballots cast during a particular election, thereby reducing costs for boards of elections. However, this provision also provides for a new potential election falsification offense. Election falsification is a fifth degree felony, which is generally punishable by between 6 and 12 months in prison, and a fine of up to \$2,500. It can be assumed that there would be very few new cases resulting from this provision. The impact on county courts, therefore, would likely be minimal.

### **Deadline for registering voters**

Current law requires a board of elections to register an applicant within 20 business days after receiving the application, unless the application is received during the 30 days prior to an election. The bill changes these dates to require a board of elections to register an applicant within ten business days, unless the application is received during the 28 days before an election. Reducing the timeframe for boards of elections could potentially result in some increased staffing costs if a particular board receives a large number of applications at one particular time, such as right before the 28 day deadline.

### **Notifying voters of rejected applications**

The bill requires that if a board of elections does not accept a person's voter registration application, it must notify the applicant, by whatever means of contact the applicant has provided on the registration application, of the reasons for rejecting the application and request that the applicant provide the necessary information. There could be some minimal costs associated with this provision. Most likely, any additional costs would be in the form of postage to send such notifications through standard mail.

### **Statewide voter registration database**

The bill requires the Secretary of State and the Registrar of Motor Vehicles (BMV) to enter into a matching agreement to verify the accuracy of voter registration records. The Secretary of State must establish, by rule, a process for notifying boards of elections of any relevant nonmatch and a procedure for the boards to process the nonmatch. The Secretary of State and Registrar of Motor Vehicles have previously been working on establishing such an agreement. Therefore, any future costs are likely to be minimal, and related to any software, maintenance, and system programming to link the statewide voter database and BMV database. The Secretary of State would pay these costs from their GRF, whereas the Department of Public Safety would pay for these costs from the BMV Operating Expenses Fund (Fund 4W40).

### **Online voter registration**

The bill requires the Secretary of State to establish a secure Internet web site to permit individuals to submit voter registration applications or changes. The web site is required to contain the same information and warnings as paper registrations, and

requires that these applications also be compared to information in the BMV database. The bill also requires that voters be notified by a board of elections if the application does not match BMV records, following a similar process used for paper registrations. According to the Secretary of State's office, the cost for processing an online voter registration application is approximately three cents, versus approximately 60 cents for a paper registration.

The bill also requires the creation of a task force to implement these requirements by developing a memorandum of understanding between the Secretary of State and the BMV. Overall, there would be some cost increases to both the Secretary of State and BMV for constructing and implementing this system. The overall costs are unknown but would largely depend on the current database capabilities of each agency and the overall further changes needed to support the new online functions. These costs would be borne through the Secretary of State's GRF, and the Department of Public Safety's BMV Operating Expenses Fund (Fund 4W40).

### **Absent voter ballot free access system**

The bill requires the Secretary of State to develop a free access system whereby any person can determine the status of the person's absent voter's ballot request, completed absent voter's ballot, and whether the person's absent voter's ballot was counted. Because the bill requires the free access system to show whether or not that ballot was sent and subsequently received, the system will require periodic transmission of information between county boards of elections and the Secretary of State. Therefore, it can be assumed that county boards of elections would incur some costs for transmitting this information. The Secretary of State's office would incur some costs for system development and implementation, as well as additional costs for the necessary data entry of the status of these absent voter's ballots. The Secretary of State's costs for creating this system would presumably be paid from GRF line item 050321, Operating Expenses, which provides most of the funding for the office's election administration responsibilities. The FY 2010-FY 2011 appropriations for these purposes is \$2.3 million in each fiscal year. In addition to the GRF, it should be noted that the Secretary of State funds some of its election administration staff through its Business Services Fund (Fund 5990). As such, it is possible that the Secretary of State could draw from this source to pay for the absent voter ballot verification system.

## **Ballot language**

### **300 word limit for question and issue ballot language**

The bill generally prohibits ballot language for any state or local question, issue, or amendment from exceeding 300 words. Currently, ballot language, when advertised, generally contains the full text of the ballot initiative in question. The Secretary of State incurs costs for ballot advertising under Article XVI, Section 1 of the Ohio Constitution, which requires that notice of ballot questions be published once a week for three consecutive weeks in a newspaper of general circulation in each Ohio county. The cost

would depend on the length of the amendment proposed by this resolution. As a recent example, the combined newspaper advertising costs for Issues 1, 2, and 3, which appeared on the November 3, 2009 general election ballot, were \$567,095. Limiting the ballot language to 300 words would conceivably reduce the cost of advertising these issues by a substantial amount in instances where ballot advertising language exceeds 300 words. The ballot issues that have appeared over the last three general elections (2006, 2008, and 2009) have averaged approximately 250 words in length, with three of the 12 ballot issues exceeding the 300-word limit. These costs are paid from Secretary of State appropriation item 050621, Statewide Ballot Advertising, appropriated at \$300,000 in each year of the FY 2010-FY 2011 biennium. The appropriation is supported by GRF transfers from the Controlling Board.

### **Sample ballots**

Boards of elections are permitted to print sample ballots for all general elections. Under current law, a board may not print more than 500 sample ballots in a county with a population less than 100,000. In all other counties, the board is prohibited from printing more than 1,000 sample ballots. The bill removes the limit on the number of sample ballots that may be printed. This is permissive authority under the bill, so it does not impose any new direct costs. However, should some counties opt to exceed the previous limit, there could be an increase in costs.

### **Voting process**

#### **Voter identification**

The bill alters the documents that may be accepted as identification. Under the bill, a voter may provide identification either in the form of a current and valid photo I.D. or provide any two items that list the voter's name in a manner that substantially conforms to the voter's name in the statewide voter registration database. These changes could potentially reduce the number of provisional ballots that are cast and the costs that counties incur for processing them.

#### **Time limit for using a voting booth**

A voter is currently prohibited from occupying a voting booth for more than ten minutes when all the voting compartments or machines are in use and voters are waiting to occupy them. The bill eliminates this time limit. This provision could potentially lead to longer lines in certain voting precincts which may result in overtime for poll workers and other employees, thereby increasing costs to counties. This would particularly be the case in elections with numerous candidates or issues in the ballot.

#### **Elections by mail**

The bill permits a board of elections to conduct certain elections held within the county by mail. This includes (1) a special election held on a day other than the day of a primary or general election as authorized by a municipal or county charter, (2) an election to fill a vacancy in a nomination for Congressional representative or a vacancy

in the office of Congressional representative, and (3) any election at which no nominations for or elections to office appear on the ballot. In cases in which an election extends across county lines, the election can only be conducted if all applicable counties agree to do so. If any of the three circumstances above apply, the applicable political subdivisions could save poll operating expenses by conducting an election by mail. Nevertheless, the situations under which a mail process could be used appear to be quite limited.

## **Provisional ballots**

### **Location for casting a provisional ballot**

Under current law, an individual must cast a provisional ballot in the correct jurisdiction for the ballot to be eligible and counted. Currently, jurisdiction is defined as the precinct in which the person is registered. The bill redefines jurisdiction as the county in which the person is registered. This provision could result in increases in provisional ballots cast in a given election, perhaps to a significant degree.

### **Determining validity of provisional ballots**

The bill sets out the criteria for determining the validity of a provisional ballot. Should it be determined that the ballot is valid, and to be counted, and the individual is registered to vote in a precinct that is different than the precinct in which the provisional ballot was cast, the bill requires the board of elections to remake the provisional ballot on a ballot that is appropriate for that precinct, and count those issues and races for which the voter was eligible to vote. Since the definition of jurisdiction was changed to county under the bill, there is a potential increase in the number of provisional ballots that may be cast. Since a majority of these provisional ballots will be eligible to be counted under the bill, counties may be required to remake a substantial number of provisional ballots into precinct specific ballots. This could impose a substantial cost to counties. In the November 2008 general election, there were approximately 207,000 provisional ballots cast in Ohio, which constituted roughly 3.6% of all ballots cast, an increase from the 2006 and 2004 general elections in which 3.1% and 2.4%, respectively, of all ballots cast were provisional ballots.

## **Absent voter's ballots**

### **Time and location for casting absent voter's ballots in person**

The bill increases the number of possible locations at which a board of elections may permit absent voter's ballots to be cast in person from one to four. Under the bill, a board of elections must not employ more than four locations. If a board votes to establish more than one location, the board must submit a plan to the Secretary of State for those locations and notify the applicable board of county commissioners of the intent to do so. Presumably, counties would only operate more than one voting center when it is determined to be more cost effective than operating one single early voting center. However, it can be assumed that reducing from 35 to 21 the days before an

election that a voter may cast an absent voter ballot will reduce the overall costs of operating these early voting centers. As an illustration, the Franklin County Board of Elections spent a total of \$225,015 to conduct in-person absentee voting at Veterans' Memorial Coliseum for the 2008 presidential election; \$142,433 of this cost was for staffing. Most likely, if a board of elections opted to use more than one voting center, it would select facilities that cost less to rent individually and would staff them with fewer people at each location.

### **Annual applications for absent voter's ballots**

The bill permits a voter to make a single request for absent voter's ballots for all elections at which the voter is eligible to vote during a calendar year. Overall, this provision could result in some minimal cost savings for counties through reducing the overall number of absent voter ballot applications that must be processed.

### **Transmission of absent voting materials**

When receiving an application for absent voter's ballots that contains all necessary information, the director of a board of elections is required to deliver proper absent voter's ballots to the applicant. Those ballots, under current law, can be delivered in person, or mailed directly to the applicant, by special delivery mail, air mail, or regular mail, postage prepaid. The bill retains these methods but also permits a board of elections to deliver absent voter's ballots to an applicant using a method other than United States mail if the address is outside of the United States. This provision could potentially reduce costs to counties for sending out absent voter's ballots.

## **Pilot projects**

### **Using county vote centers in lieu of precinct polling places**

The bill permits the Secretary of State to implement a pilot project to evaluate the use of county vote centers for general elections for state and county office in the year 2011 as an alternative to operating precinct polling places. A county vote center is a polling location at which any person registered to vote in a county may appear to cast a ballot on the day of the general election, regardless of the location of the precinct within the county in which the person resides. A county board of elections wishing to be involved in the pilot project would be required to hold public hearings on the issue and submit public comments to the Secretary of State and notify the board of county commissioners of its desire to participate. The board of elections must also have implemented a computerized voter registration list that allows election officials at the county vote center to verify that a person has not already voted. The Secretary of State would be required to determine if the county has sufficient resources to implement such a program. Conceivably, operating a singular vote center could reduce the number of staff and other related costs attributable to operating numerous polling places on an election day.

### **Electronic transmission of unvoted absent voter's ballots**

The bill also permits the Secretary of State to implement a pilot project to evaluate the effectiveness and reliability of transmitting unvoted absent voter's ballots and unvoted armed service absent voter's ballots by secure electronic transmission to eligible voters. Sending such ballots through electronic transmission could reduce mailing costs to counties. The costs of conducting this pilot program are unclear but for the counties selected, could reduce ballot costs.

### **Joint Task Force on Special Elections and Cost Reductions**

The bill creates the Joint Task Force on Special Elections and Cost Reductions, comprised of members of the General Assembly, officials from the Office of the Secretary of State, representatives from local government associations, election officials, and members of the public. The Task Force would be required to study the timing and conduct of special elections for the purpose of developing recommendations to unify special election dates, and to examine opportunities to reduce the cost of election administration. The findings must be submitted to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, President of the Senate, and all charter counties and charter municipal corporations by December 31, 2010.

### **Miscellaneous provisions**

#### **Purchase contracts for election supplies**

The bill requires the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) to establish a purchasing program through which the Department enters into purchase contracts for supplies used by boards of elections, including any required polling place supplies. If a county opts to participate in the purchasing program, it may purchase its supplies through DAS contracts. Presumably, DAS can acquire these supplies through its contracts at a cheaper rate than each individual county, thereby reducing some supply costs to county boards of elections.

#### **Ballot printing contracts**

Under current law, a contract for the printing of ballots involving a cost of \$10,000 or more must not be let until after five days' notice is published once in a leading newspaper of general circulation. The bill increases the cost of ballot printing contracts that a board of elections may enter into without publishing notice and without requiring a bond from \$10,000 to \$25,000. Assuming that counties would select the most cost effective printing bid available, this provision could reduce advertising costs to some counties.