Kari Verjil
Registrar of Voters

Rebecca Spencer
Assistant Registrar of Voters

REGISTRAR OF VOTERS
COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE

Why counting ballots takes time, and why the options are limited

Thirty minutes after the polls closed on Election Night, results from almost 40 percent of all the votes cast in the election were posted on the Riverside County Registrar of Voters website. That's the highest percentage ever released in this county as part of the first results on Election Night for a presidential election.

So why do the results seem to slow down after the first returns?

The first returns, largely, represent results from vote-by-mail ballots that teams at the Registrar's office in Riverside have been processing for up to seven business days before Election Day. Ballots cast at polling places from Temecula to Blythe, however, must be transported to Riverside before their counting process begins. And ballots can't even get on the road until after every voter at a polling place is finished voting, and until poll workers have finished conducting polling-place closing procedures mandated by the state.

By around 9 p.m. on Election Night the very first ballots started leaving a few polling places, heading for Riverside. That meant that two hours after the polls closed, there were no more than a few thousand ballots in Riverside for registrar's employees to even start processing and counting. It would be about 1:15 a.m. Wednesday before all the ballots cast at the polls had arrived at the counting center.

In a county nearly the size of New Jersey, transporting ballots is an unavoidable, time-consuming task that we have attacked with help from sheriff's deputies who shuttle ballots by car as well as helicopter.

In the weeks before the election and several times on Election Night, the Registrar's office notified the media, candidates and social media followers that it could take until noon Wednesday to count all the polling place ballots. That estimate took into account transport time, the speed of the ballot counting machines and other factors. The registrar's teams cut four hours off that time estimate and counted the ballots seven hours faster than in the 2008 presidential election.

A little history about the vote counting process offers insight into the time required to count ballots and release results. Riverside County was a pioneer and gained national recognition when it transitioned to a fast, accurate electronic voting system that the state endorsed and certified. Then the state changed the rules and decertified electronic voting for the 2008 presidential elections. That year, the ballot count was 12 hours slower than with the electronic system in 2004.

Because decertification hit so soon before the 2008 election, the county could not put a new system in place. Instead, cumbersome ballot counters had to be adapted from a secondary system the county used to count absentee ballots. Decertification forced the county to use a slower, secondary system as its primary ballot counter.

Often, that background leads to a few frequently asked questions:

<u>What about adding more of the counting machines the county uses now?</u>
There aren't any more new or used machines available. Companies uncertain about certification will not invest millions to develop new, or update existing, systems that counties might not be allowed to use. In the past year, Riverside County purchased five refurbished ballot counting machines, giving us a total of 11. By comparison, San Bernardino and Santa Clara counties have 14 of the same machines and fewer registered voters than Riverside County, which has 943,402. San Bernardino County finished counting ballots 90 minutes before Riverside County the morning after the election.

<u>Can't you match new components to the existing system?</u>
Unfortunately, any new system, or even matching different machines to an existing system, requires certification from the California Secretary of State. The agency's web page says the last time a system was certified in California was 2008. And currently no California county has introduced a blended system.

<u>But if you *could* count ballots faster on Election Night, we would see final results faster, right?</u>
Probably not much. Even if we gained a few hours on Election Night, the county still must deal with tens of thousands of other ballots, including provisional and damaged ballots. That's what takes the time. Both require extensive work to process – more than other ballots. That work is going on now in Riverside County, and still is going on in California's other counties. The state recognizes the difficulty of that task and provides that the canvass of all the ballots, which finalizes the work, must be completed within 28 days after the election.

<u>Isn't there something you can do?</u>
There is, and we will continue to do it. More than 58 percent of Riverside County voters now vote by mail and the county will continue its push to have voters return those ballots before Election Day. When more ballots are returned early, more can be processed early and included in the tallies released in the first results after the polls close.

That means fewer vote-by-mail ballots dropped off at polling places on Election Day. This year that number was approximately 105,000, similar to past presidential elections and similar to the number other counties of the same size receive. Vote-by-mail ballots dropped off at the polls aren't processed until after the polling-place ballots have been tallied. It is important to remember that the registrar's staff can begin working on early returns of vote-by-mail ballots seven business days before the election. Typically, it takes counties several days to several weeks to verify signatures on vote-by-mail ballots dropped off on Election Day, as the law requires. Until that step has been completed, the ballots cannot be counted.

The registrar's staff works around the clock to speed the process. We want to know the results as much as everyone else, but an election is not a horse race. We cannot sacrifice accuracy in order to finish a little faster. Despite the challenges and legally required tasks, we will keep looking for ways to count ballots faster while conducting reliable, accurate elections.

Kari Verjil is the Riverside County Registrar of Voters.