

# Mason County

## Election Procedures Review | 2023 General Election

Final Report Issued May 2024

The report does not affect the validity of the outcome of a primary or election or the validity of any canvass of returns (RCW 29A.04.570).



**WASHINGTON**  
Secretary of State  

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## Review Process

The county elections department procedures review process:

- Promotes consistency of election administration statewide.
- Provides feedback to the County Auditor.
- Highlights best practices in our state.

County elections departments are scheduled for review every 5 years. Mason County was last reviewed during the February 2018 Special Election.<sup>1</sup>

This review, required by state law, evaluates Mason County Elections Department procedures and practices. A certified elections administrator from the Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State conducted the review.

The reviewer followed a checklist containing election procedures and processes. The election department procedures reference state statutes, state rules, and federal acts regarding the administration of elections and voter registration. The reviewer observed election practices during the 2023 General Election. Written procedures and county documentation were analyzed for compliance with state laws and rules.

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<sup>1</sup> [RCW 29A.04.560](#), [RCW 29A.04.570](#)

## County Elections Department Fact Sheet

**Election:** 2023 General Election

**Registered voters:** 44,641

**Ballots returned:** 15,764

**Percentage of voter turnout:** 35.5%

**Total ballot deposit sites available:** 12

**Voting center locations:** County Auditor's Office (Shelton)

**24-hour ballot deposit sites:** Mason County Courthouse, Shelton Family YMCA, Allyn, Belfair, Grapeview, Hoodsport, Dayton, Kamilche, Skokomish, Union

**Permanent staff:** 3

**Seasonal staff:** 8

**County square miles:** 1,051

**Congressional and legislative districts:** Congressional District 6 and Legislative District 35

**Incorporated cities/towns:** Shelton

**Unincorporated areas:** Allyn, Belfair, Grapeview, Hoodsport, Kamilche, Lilliwaup, Matlock, Tahuya, Union

**Ballot tabulation system:** Clear Ballot ClearVote

**Unique challenges:** Mason County Elections has three fulltime staff, which limits capacity for voter outreach and promotional events in the community. The Auditor's Office has limited space in the Mason County Administration Building, which creates challenges for providing adequate space for voters, staff, and observers in the voting center and ballot processing areas. The space for the voting center accommodates no more than two voters, and the ballot processing area accommodates three signature verification staff, five ballot processing staff and six observers.

## Best Practices

County elections department activities that improve efficiency, accuracy, and voter services.

### Disability Advisory Committee Membership and Invitations

County auditors must have an established Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) that “includes persons with diverse disabilities and persons with expertise in providing accommodations for persons with disabilities.” The Mason County Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC) is the DAC for Mason County. Although the VAAC has not met in more than a year (see Suggestions for Improvement), the members of the VAAC include a diverse set of people with varied perspectives. The committee includes representation from a broad range of civic, non-profit, government, and advocacy organizations. The County Auditor has identified more than 20 organizations to participate in the VAAC who have been invited to participate in the committee. Although not all invited organizations participate in the VAAC, the Mason County Auditor continues to invite groups to expand the committee’s representation. The diverse perspectives of this group allow Mason County to develop plans that are inclusive of the largest number of people and responsive to the needs of Mason County’s voting population.<sup>2</sup>

### Ballot Deposit Site Placement and Tracking

Mason County Elections exceeds the minimum number of ballot boxes required, which are based on the total number of registered voters, with requirements to install a ballot box in each incorporated city or town, and each census designated place with a post office. Mason County’s ballot box installation plan includes fire suppression measures inside the boxes, GPS monitoring, and camera surveillance where possible, all of which help mitigate the impacts of vandalism and theft, while ensuring that the ballots in each deposit site remain secure. For ballots returned by fax from service and overseas voters, Mason County has placed the fax machine in a secure storage area, which ensures that a ballot sent by fax outside of business hours is kept in the secure storage area and handled by two people when staff open the secure area on the next business day that ballots are processed.<sup>3</sup>

### Ballot Processing

Mason County implemented a new sorter to maximize efficient ballot envelope processing. The addition of the sorter required Mason County Auditor staff to revise and adjust existing processes to include the new equipment. The result is a well-defined process that included separation of processing steps, clearly marked tags for handling and storing ballots, and detailed tracking sheets. When the signature of the voter is missing or does not match, staff mark the face of the envelope with tracking information that documents the deficiency and included information about the date a notice was sent to a voter. These create a clear process that is visible to the public and observers, while maintaining an audit trail to demonstrate secure handling and storage of ballots.

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<sup>2</sup> [RCW 29A.04.223](#)

<sup>3</sup> [RCW 29A.40.170](#), [RCW 29A.40.110](#), [WAC 434-250-120](#)

## Suggestions for Improvement

These suggestions assist the county elections department in implementing state and federal laws and rules.

### Accessible Route to the Voting Center (Previously Noted in 2018 Review)

County auditors must provide signs that direct voters on an accessible route from the building entrance to the Voting Center. The Mason County Auditor has ample signs and information outside of the building, and it is well marked as a place for voting. The accessible path to the building is also well marked. However, once inside the building there are no signs marking the path to the Mason County Elections Office on the second floor or to the elevator. The Mason County Auditor must provide signs to direct the public to the Mason County Elections Office and mark the accessible route.<sup>4</sup>

### Electronic Ballot Duplication

When a county auditor implements an electronic ballot duplication system, the system must be tested as part of the Logic and Accuracy (L&A) Tests. Electronic ballot duplication systems must also meet the same requirements as paper duplication methods, including assigning a unique control number, producing a log of the duplicated ballots, and a full audit of duplicated ballots. The Mason County Canvassing Board Manual makes reference to electronic ballot duplication but does not include a procedure for a full audit of electronically duplicated ballots, and the electronic ballot duplication system was not tested as part of the L&A Test. The Mason County Canvassing Board must adopt a procedure for electronic ballot duplication that includes a full audit of duplicated ballots. The Mason County Auditor must include the electronic ballot duplication system in the L&A Test.<sup>5</sup>

### Verification of Return Dates for Ballots

County auditors must verify the return date of ballots, first using postmarks and other marks, imprints, and applications by the U.S. Postal Service or commercial mailing service, then the date written by the voter with their signature. The Mason County Canvassing Board manual directs staff to use the postmark (postage cancellation), then the date written by the voter, and finally the other marks, imprints, or applications. The Mason County Canvassing Board must update the Canvassing Board Manual to check the return date in the correct sequence.<sup>6</sup>

### Canvassing Board Minutes

County canvassing boards must document the proceedings of meetings for the purpose of maintaining an audit trail. Canvassing board minutes must include the date, time, and place that the canvassing board met, along with a record of the disposition of ballots that were counted or not counted. The Mason County Canvassing Board correctly documents the disposition of ballots and the date and time of meetings; however, the meeting place is omitted. The Mason County Canvassing Board must record in the minutes the location meetings in the minutes of meetings where the Canvassing Board makes decisions about the disposition of ballots.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 52 U.S.C. § 20102 (Help America Vote Act of 2002), [RCW 29A.40.160](#), [WAC 434-250-105](#)

<sup>5</sup> [RCW 29A.12.130](#), [RCW 29A.60.120](#), [RCW 29A.60.125](#), [WAC 434-261-005](#), [WAC 434-261-070](#), [WAC 434-261-100](#), [WAC 434-335-330](#),

<sup>6</sup> [RCW 29A.40.110](#), [WAC 434-250-120](#)

<sup>7</sup> [WAC 434-250-130](#)

## County Response

### **Accessible Route to the Vote Center**

Signs have been created to display in the entryway of the first floor entrance of the building indicating the Vote Center is located on the second floor and accessible access to the elevator.

### **Electronic Ballot Duplication**

Mason County currently does fully audit both paper and electronic ballot duplication; both are included on the ballot duplication log. Also added language that electronic ballot duplication process is completed as part of the Logic and Accuracy (L&A) Tests. The Canvassing Board Manual will be updated on 5/3/24 to reflect the proper procedures that are currently followed.

### **Verification of Return Dates for Ballots**

Mason County follows the correct procedures for checking return dates of ballots. The current process is to verify the stamped postmark from USPS, if the postmark is unreadable or missing, then the neon barcode is read with the provided tool to determine the postmark date. If the barcode is unreadable or missing, then the date the voter indicates is used as the date. The Canvassing Board Manual will be updated on 5/3/24 to reflect the proper procedures that are currently followed.

### **Canvassing Board Minutes**

The Canvassing Board Minutes now include “Ballot Processing Room located at 411 N 5<sup>th</sup> St., Shelton” in the header with the meeting date.

## Synopsis

During the review election procedures and processes were examined. The county elections department procedures were reviewed against state statutes, state rules, and federal acts regarding the administration of elections and voter registration. The reviewer observed election practices during the 2023 General Election.

The reviewer identified areas of best practices:

- Disability Advisory Committee Membership and Invitations
- Ballot Deposit Site Placement and Tracking
- Ballot Processing

The report suggests improvement in the following areas:

- Accessible Route to the Voting Center (Previously Noted in 2018 Review)
- Electronic Ballot Duplication
- Verification of Return Dates for Ballots
- Canvassing Board Minutes

The included response of the County Auditor and County Canvassing Board addresses compliance with state and federal laws to ensure accessible, fair, and accurate elections.

The report does not affect the validity of the outcome of a primary or election or the validity of any canvass of returns. The election reviewer does not have jurisdiction to make such an evaluation, finding, or recommendation under this title. (RCW 29A.04.570).