April 16, 2021

San Juan County Charter Review Commission
℅ Kevin Ranker, Chair
Via Email

Dear Commissioners,

We are grateful for the opportunity to present to the Commission the benefits of ranked-choice voting (RCV) and the three potential paths available to San Juan County to adopt RCV. Thank you!

In our opinion, adopting RCV for the general election (by combining it with the primary) for all countywide elected positions is the simplest option that delivers the main benefits of RCV. If desired, a phased plan of using RCV for one countywide race in one election, then adding others over time based on real experience, is a possibility. We believe the chief benefits to SJC will be moving voters' decisions to the high turnout general election and ensuring elected officials enjoy the highest possible public confidence after the election.

No matter the CRC's decision on which RCV option to pursue or its timing, FairVote Washington is committed to support the SJC CRC as desired in its deliberations on RCV.

At the meeting, the Commission asked for a written response to the presentation of Sharon Hanek. We respect Ms. Hanek's experience and recognize that any plan to advance RCV in San Juan County must properly address the issues that arose during Pierce County's implementation of RCV in 2008. In addition, Auditor Henley must be empowered with solutions that ensure a smooth rollout and execution of RCV.

Our response to Ms. Hanek's presentation has three main points:

1.

   In the years since Pierce County's experience, there has been much progress in voting technology and support for RCV. We hope to work with Auditor Henley to demonstrate this progress and ensure a smooth rollout.

2.

   In the 13 years since Pierce County's experience, there has been much progress in voter education and communication materials. These materials reduce voter reluctance and confusion and raise voter confidence in election outcomes. We hope to work with Auditor Henley to ensure SJC has best-in-class voter education and communication materials.

3.

   Some of Ms. Hanek's claims were anecdotal and differ from other jurisdictions which have successfully implemented RCV. We respect Ms. Hanek's experience and these are worth examining, however, there are numerous of counterexamples that are far more representative of the norm.

Below, we will provide more specifics and place Ms. Hanek's claims in context.

1.

   Modern voting technology ensures smooth and cost-effective adoption of RCV.

   1.

      Fifteen years ago, Pierce County spent $1.6 million to implement RCV. Costs have dropped dramatically since then: In 2018, the entire state of Maine spent $103,000 to implement RCV (statewide). The most recent three implementations of RCV, in 2019 and 2020 (Eastpointe, Michigan; Payson, Utah; Vineyard, Utah) were all accomplished for zero net cost.

   2.

      Ms Hanek claimed that RCV requires two ballots to be printed, one for the traditional election format and one for RCV. That is no longer true. Modern voting technology (including San Juan County's equipment) allows for single ballots to contain a mix of traditional and RCV races.

   3.

      Ms. Hanek claimed that calculating the results of RCV ballot rounds was time consuming, taking six weeks to complete. That is no longer true. New technology makes calculating each round nearly instantaneous.

   4.

      Ms. Hanek claimed that combining RCV with voting by mail would preclude announcing election results for weeks. Modern technology makes it possible to quickly report interim results at all times (as we do with current vote-by-mail elections).

   5.

      Ms. Hanek claimed that RCV relies on a black box algorithm making it impossible to perform a hand recount. This is not true. RCV can be hand-counted, just like any other election; that's how it's done in numerous other countries (see this Radiolab podcast about RCV elections in Ireland). The City of Minneapolis hand-counted all their RCV elections beginning in 2009, until they modernized their equipment a few years later.

   6.

      Ms. Hanek claimed that San Juan County's voting equipment cannot tabulate RCV elections and that data transfer must be done manually. It is true that an additional system will need to be added to conduct the RCV elimination rounds in San Juan County, but data does not need to be re-entered. San Juan's system, Hart Verity Central / Verity

Touch, does not currently have software to do round-by-round counts necessary to report RCV results - however, they can capture voter ranking data and are fully compatible with the [RCV Universal Tabulator](#), a federally-tested system available for free that has already been used to conduct real world RCV elections, including two races that were conducted under federal Department of Justice supervision in Eastpointe, Michigan (where ranked-choice voting was adopted to remedy a federal Voting Rights Act lawsuit).

2.

Modern voter education and communication materials ensure voter confidence in the election

a.

Nonprofit entities exist today, like FairVote Washington and the [Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center](#) (an organization staffed by former elections officials with RCV experience) that can provide highly-technical expertise for free to any jurisdiction seeking to adopt RCV. The RCVRC has worked closely with The Center for Civic Design, one of the most trusted names in ballot layout and voter education, to develop best practices for RCV ballot design, voter education, and ballot tabulation.

b.

Ms. Hanek claimed she experienced many voters who were confused about how to use RCV at the precincts. That can be managed successfully with modern media materials. Data from states like Maine, Minnesota, Utah, and California consistently show [overwhelming majorities of voters describing voting with RCV as "simple," "easy to understand," and "not at all confusing."](#) In fact, a poll that came out just today from New York City's current election reports that [95%](#) of voters found ranked-choice voting "easy."

c.

Ms. Hanek claimed voter education for RCV is expensive. Most modern RCV materials are free to jurisdictions and the internet greatly reduces the cost of content distribution. The previously-cited cost figures from Utah and Maine were inclusive of robust voter education programs; voters in those jurisdictions cited high levels of understanding of RCV.

3.

Anecdotes and counter examples.

a.

Ms. Hanek claimed RCV caused voter dropoff. She attributed this to the use of two ballots and general voter confusion. In fact, modern evidence suggests that turnout either stays the same under RCV, [or it increases](#): *"RCV was associated with a 24*

percentage point reduction in voter drop-off compared with plurality elections that required a two-round election process."

b.

Ms. Hanek claimed RCV races fail with more than 3 or 4 candidates. This is not true. Some election administrators have limited the number of candidates voters are allowed to rank to 3, but RCV is compatible with any number of candidates. Even the limit on rankings, however, is not a practical problem: the vast majority of RCV systems can allow voters to rank more candidates than they need.

c.

Ms. Hanek claimed that a candidate she deemed unqualified won election as Pierce County Assessor-Treasurer in 2008, and furthermore she claimed that he would not have won, but for RCV. In fact, Pierce County's election results show that the candidate she refers to, Dale Washam, received the most first-choice votes in that election.

d.

Ms. Hanek claimed that "If your favorite candidate doesn't win, your vote will go to a 2nd candidate even if you don't like them." This is not true. A vote only ever goes to a 2nd choice if the voter chooses to mark a 2nd choice. If a voter only likes one candidate, they are free to rank only one candidate, and the voter's ballot will only support that candidate. If a voter doesn't want their ballot to support a candidate, they can simply not rank that candidate.

e.

Ms. Hanek claimed that combining RCV with voting by mail would preclude announcing election results for weeks. While it is theoretically possible that one ballot could change the winner of an RCV election, that is also true of a traditional election. Most RCV elections will be resolved based on first choice votes exactly like a traditional election. Just as close elections under the current system report interim, not-final results, so too can ranked-choice contests report interim, not-final results. Voters understand the distinction in both circumstances.

f.

Ms. Hanek claimed that voter confidence will be shaken under an RCV voting system. Evidence shows that RCV maintains or increases voter satisfaction with election outcomes; see item 8 of the Campaign Legal Center's issue brief on the Civic Benefits of Ranked-Choice Voting.

g.

Ms. Hanek implored Commissioners to, "talk to people who were there." We suggest starting with two longtime, respected public officials who have a deep, "insider's" view of that election:

i.

Current Pierce County Auditor Julie Anderson was first elected to office in that RCV election. She has stated that Pierce County's 13-years-ago experience with RCV should not be held up as a reason to shy away from adopting RCV today.

ii.

Current Thurston County Auditor Mary Hall played a key role in implementing that same Pierce County RCV election. She has stated that the election was conducted with integrity and that there were no questions as to the legitimacy of the outcomes.

Finally, we offer a recent op-ed from Utah County Auditor Amelia Powers Gardner, who implemented ranked-choice voting for the first time in 2019. She addresses many of the issues raised during Wednesday's CRC meeting: https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/3/17/22327919/utah-county-clerk-auditor-ranked-choice-voting-rcv-faster-cheaper-elections

Thank you again for the opportunity to present the benefits of RCV to the Commission. It is FairVote Washington's sincere desire to support San Juan County to implement RCV successfully.

Sincerely,

Lisa

Lisa Ayrault | Executive Director, FairVote Washington | fairvotewa.org
Ranked-choice voting for Washington
A non-partisan, non-profit in Washington state