

# Missing Whitman County ballots causing concerns

By Bill McKee, Daily News staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 19, 2014 12:00 am

At least 80 people in Whitman County reported not receiving their ballots for the special February election, according to the county elections office.

Of those, 71 eventually got their ballots after calling to let the elections office know, but what exactly happened, along with how many didn't receive a ballot and simply didn't say anything, is still unknown. No other counties have reported similar issues in the recent election.

Endicott resident Colleen Winchester was among those who didn't receive a ballot. She called twice and waited more than two weeks after she was twice told replacement ballots would be sent out. In the end she had to drive to Colfax on election day to make sure her vote would count.

At the office she said she was further dismayed to discover she wasn't the only one.

"There was a stack of notes on the desk from people who hadn't gotten their ballots," Winchester said. "I asked how they could close elections when people haven't gotten their ballots. They told me they can't control whether or not people get their mail."

Washington has only been a vote-by-mail state for a few years now, but Whitman County has been doing it since 2005.

While this isn't the county's first election snafu - in the recent November election a number of Oakesdale residents failed to receive their ballots as well - it is the most numerous and widespread case of people not receiving their ballots that Whitman County Auditor Eunice Coker, who heads the county election department, can recall.

"We've had very high success rates over the years. There have been pocketed issues in the past, but this is random across the county," she said.

Strangely, each of the people who didn't receive their ballot in the recent election lives in a home with at least one other voter who did, she said, and invalid mailing addresses have already been determined not to be the problem.

Coker said the county was as diligent as ever in its effort getting ballots out - meticulously counting to ensure the number of ballots that went out matched the number listed in the voter registration database, and sending them straight to the Colfax post office, where they were given special priority.

From there, ballots went with the rest of the mail to the postal distribution center in Spokane before returning to voters in Whitman County.

While a representative for the Colfax post office said they had been working with the county to try to determine what caused the ballots to go missing, Ernie Swanson, a spokesman for the U.S. Postal

Service in Washington, said they had yet to be notified of the issue.

"All the mail is extremely important, but election ballots are something the Postal Service pays special attention to," he said. "Every once in a while we hear about customers not getting their ballots, but this is very unusual. Even one would be a source of concern, but this is a pretty large number."

A spokesman for the Secretary of State's office also said they were unaware of the issue.

Coker said the county's election office has been investigating the cause - she believes a new spray-on barcode system that automates voters' addresses may be to blame - but didn't feel the problem had yet escalated to the point of needing to notify the Secretary of State's Office.

"We're digging diligently into what's going on, looking into possible issues with the new system and working with the local post office to try and determine what happened," she said.

The head of the county election office, Debbie Hooper, said while they will continue to work to try to determine the cause of the problem, some of the responsibility for elections still lies with the voters. If a ballot doesn't show up, whatever the reason, the elections office will do what it can - sending another ballot in the mail, emailing it, faxing it - to try to make sure it gets to the voter. If it isn't notified of the problem, however, it won't know help is needed.

"It's very frustrating to both the voters and us," she said. "But there's a lot of reasons (ballots) could go missing. It's up to the voter to let us know if they don't get theirs."

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