

Mixed Greens

An assortment of fresh tossed ideas.

009 Going flapless

Some of us took our envelopes flapless in 2010. In this edition of Mixed Greens, Dolores Gilmore, Skip Moore and Wendy Mauch reflect on the experience.

Why did you decide to go flapless?

Dolores: Kitsap County changed the envelope design to flapless between the 2010 Primary and General Election.

The decision to use flapless envelopes was based on an anticipated \$30,000 savings.

We decided to make the change prior to the November election because the record number of measures increased the size of the ballot. We purchased large-sized envelopes that needed design changes anyway.

Skip: The driving forces behind going flapless in Chelan County were the savings on the cost of the envelopes and the savings in time when processing the incoming envelopes.

Wendy: To save money and improve processing efficiency, Snohomish County went flapless. The previous envelopes were \$.0965 each whereas the flapless envelope we designed costs only \$.035 each. With 375,000 ballots mailed each election, the savings adds up pretty quick.

We were also interested in improving processing efficiency. Without a flap we signature-check more quickly. It also makes plans to image the signature on the return envelope more viable.

Did you have any concerns going into the process?

Dolores: Three concerns are completing the design changes in time to mail the ballots, the possibility of loop mail and upset voters.

Skip: Our major concern was whether the public would embrace a change that only benefited our office at the appearance of placing the public's signature at risk.

Wendy: Yes, we worried about how our voters would respond. Would anger and frustration increase the number of unsigned ballots or decrease voter participation?

Did you educate your community about the flapless envelope? How?

Dolores: We did a press release prior to the ballots being mailed. Other counties in the region (Snohomish and King) had already gone flapless in the Primary.

Skip: We had planned a big PR push on the new envelope. Then decided "Why stir up an issue that may not really be an issue?" So there was no prior announcement.

Wendy: Our education campaign was low-key. We posted a FAQ online about why we made the change. In press releases we mentioned the change in envelope and the savings associated. We also mentioned it in our online local voters' pamphlet and had a pre-recorded phone message for callers. Finally, we prepared a consistent response for email inquiries.

"We had planned a big PR push on the new envelope. Then decided 'Why stir up an issue that may not really be an issue?'"

Mixed Greens

An assortment of fresh tossed ideas.

Briefly describe the envelope redesign process. Share challenges/solutions.

Dolores: We looked at other flapless county designs and our current design.

Our biggest challenge was the short design timeline. Reviews, proofing and finalizing the order were all done by mail. We never saw the envelopes before printing. With so many revisions, it was difficult to ensure which envelopes were in what stage of completion. Numbering the proofing files would have been helpful.

Our printer did not use the easy-open style secrecy envelope that we requested. By the time we discovered it, the ballots were mailed so we changed our ballot-processing procedures.

The size difference between the signature and secrecy envelopes made them difficult to separate during processing.

Skip: Chelan County drew on Jenny Greeve's guidance and design ideas. We collected and reviewed envelopes from other states and counties to see what we liked and what we didn't. We used this opportunity to redesign the entire envelope packet. One of our challenges was the loss of space to provide the voter information. It made us evaluate what was and what was not necessary.

When the voter received the Primary ballot, the look and feel was all new. We also used this opportunity to coordinate our ballot drop boxes and courthouse signage. This was a large project but we are thrilled with the outcome and thankful for all of Jenny's work and understanding of design.

Wendy: One of the first calls we placed was to Jenny Greeve at the Secretary of State. She worked with us and a number of other counties to provide a redesign that followed Design for Democracy standards and met the needs of our print and insertion vendor.

Because price was one of our principal concerns, we kept with standard envelope construction and creatively used the space available. To help voters and the Post Office recognize and transition to the new envelope format, we kept a splash of the purple color that previously served as our base envelope color.

What was the nature and volume of feedback you received?

Dolores: Only 1/4 of 1 percent provided some kind of feedback. All stated identity theft as the major concern.

Most of the feedback was written notes in or on the envelope. There were fewer phone calls than expected.

All of the voters were surprised to learn their signature was public information.

Most thought cost should not be a consideration and budget cuts should be done elsewhere.

Skip: In the Primary, there were only 9 direct responses to the envelope out of 37,000 registered voters. All were negative.

There was no direct feedback from the General Election.

During face-to-face conversations with the public, the general theme was "Glad to see you got rid of the flap. I could never figure out if I was doing it right".

Wendy: "What are you thinking?" "How dare you expose me to danger!" "You'll pay for my stolen identity." "You are feckless!" There was a vocal minority that had concerns. During the Primary we took a couple hundred phone calls and 50 or so emails telling us to go back to what we had. Also, three emails thanked us for the change (The flapless envelope is easier for voters).

In the General Election we received fewer than 10 negative comments about the envelope. This may have been due in part to the opening of eight 24-hour drop boxes in which we received back almost 91,000 ballots (49,000 on Election Day alone).

"Only 1/4 of 1 percent provided some kind of feedback."

Mixed Greens

An assortment of fresh tossed ideas.

Anything else about the experience or process others should know?

Dolores: We made the right decision for our county and would do it again.

We underestimated the additional time/cost savings in processing returned ballots.

The loop mail affected only a handful of ballots (four that we know of). However, maybe we were just lucky. This has the potential of being a big issue.

Skip: Expect your drop box use to go up dramatically. Our push was "Save a stamp. Use a drop box."

Wendy: If you're considering the change, do it now so you aren't managing this change with the crush of the busy election, such as a Presidential Election. We were amazed at the decrease in voter comments after only one election.

"If you're considering the change, do it now so you aren't managing this change with the crush of a busy election..."

What advice do you have for others considering going flapless?

Dolores: Review other flapless county designs and incorporate what works best for your process.

Start as early as possible and keep your printer and mailing service involved. Do a complete proof of each of the five final envelope designs before printing, not just at the last revision changes.

Use a design that covers the name and address leaving only the signature exposed if possible. This solves the loop mail and exposed voter information issues while it keeps the standard envelope and processing cost savings.

Skip: Ensure that if you talk of savings that you have the numbers to back it up.

Get your entire team together and come up with talking points on how everyone is to respond to negative calls.

Use going flapless as an opportunity to totally relook at your mailing process, from envelope design to envelope processing to drop box operations.

Enjoy it! What is the worst that can happen? Everyone will hate you. Ahhhh risk, it doesn't get any better than that!

Wendy: Keep your vendors in the loop.

Be sure the Post Office and postal carriers get a glimpse of what they will be seeing and processing.

Assure voters that the process is the same as before.

Wendy Mauch

Elections Supervisor
wendy.mauch@co.snohomish.wa.us

Dolores Gilmore

Elections Manager
dgilmore@co.kitsap.wa.us

Skip Moore

Chelan County Auditor
skip.moore@co.chelan.wa.us