

Viewpoints: Lawmakers stick locals with costs of voting

Column by Kim Alexander, Special to The Bee

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The new state budget is here, and once again it leaves the state's election system holding an increasingly empty bag.

For years counties have relied on the state to help fund state laws that change the voting process and in turn, make extra work and cost extra money for counties.

The last time election mandates were funded was 2009, when they accounted for about \$30 million paid to all 58 counties. The largest in terms of dollars and impact is the permanent absentee voter program, which allows Californians to sign up to vote by mail in every election rather than reapplying each time.

Since then, the money has been withheld by the state and counties have had to make do with less. At the same time, counties no longer get reimbursed for the cost of special legislative elections, despite their growing frequency.

In Sacramento County, the amount of election funding withheld by the state amounts to approximately \$1 million annually. The last time it was paid, in 2008-09, it amounted to 9 percent of the county's total elections budget.

Meanwhile, additional mandates keep coming. In 2012 Sacramento, along with five other California counties, was required under the Voting Rights Act (an unfunded federal mandate on local government) to offer ballot materials in additional languages based on U.S. census data. For Sacramento County, this meant producing a Chinese language version of the sample ballot. To meet the mandate while saving costs, the county produced sample ballots in a trilingual format but in fonts so small and pages so crowded with tiny text that they were practically unreadable.

If the county has to cut its budget further due to a lack of state mandate funding, voters could see a reduction in popular services such as vote-by-mail ballot drop-off sites (used by more than 16,000 voters last November) and Saturday voting before election days. Losing these services will likely slow down counting if more vote-by-mail ballots flood into polling places on election days, as they require extra time to process.

Why is election funding being sacrificed? While some legislative leaders fought for and won commitments to fund dental services and higher education funding, no one fought for elections funding. Elections are an orphaned issue in the Capitol, without a champion to fight for voters.

Oh sure, there are committee chairs and candidates for secretary of state, but let's face it: Elections are not a "juice" issue, like banking or housing, where there is big money, big campaign contributions and big-time lobbyists trolling about. Those are the issues lawmakers invest their time and political capital in, not elections.

Of course, the state does fund several agencies that ensure our elections are conducted in a fair and reliable way, and the costs of agencies such as the secretary of state's office and the Fair Political Practices Commission are not insignificant.

But the direct costs of administering elections are not insignificant either and are entirely borne by local government. And even though state and federal contests take up the most real estate on our ballots, neither governmental level pays any portion of the direct costs of deciding those outcomes.

This is not true in other states, especially Western states which, like California, have a robust initiative process. In Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Washington, the state bears a far larger portion of local election costs – whether printing ballots, maintaining voting equipment or simply writing the locality a check.

This lack of funding has other impacts. California has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the nation, placing 45th, tied with Tennessee, according to recent census data analyzed by George Mason University.

Imagine how much impact California could have on the nation if more of our voters participated in elections. Funding elections at the local level is the first step toward maximizing voter participation and California's influence.

It used to be that funding state election mandates was viewed as sacrosanct because when it comes to elections, we all need to operate under the same rules statewide. We cannot have a system where one county allows voters to sign up as permanent absentee voters and another county prohibits it, but that is where we are headed if the Legislature doesn't make good on its laws and mandates.

The Legislature should ensure that counties serve voters equally and abide by state laws by providing the funding that is already obligated as well and funding the costs of conducting special legislative elections.

Earmarking \$30 million to fund election mandates, especially in these times when the state is finally back in the black, would be a small expense (0.03 percent) for the state's \$96 billion budget but would represent a major investment by the state in funding elections and demonstrating a commitment to improving the state's voter participation. And in 45th place, there's really nowhere for California to go but up.

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