Our next post focusing on voter education responds to a concern: “What causes an absentee ballot to be rejected? How am I notified if my ballot is rejected? How do I know that my ballot has been received and will be counted?” The City Clerk addresses this three part question below.

What causes an absentee ballot to be rejected?

There are specific reasons why an absentee ballot may be rejected. For every election, the total number of returned and rejected ballots is very small compared to the number of ballots that are returned and accepted.

The most common reason an absentee ballot that is received on time is rejected is because the voter did not sign the back of the return envelope. Please be sure to SIGN the back of your envelope prior to returning it. This reminder is included in the instructions that come with your ballot – where to sign is highlighted, and there are reminders on the dropbox if you choose to return your ballot by dropping it off.

The second most common reason why a ballot is rejected is due to the ballot having been returned improperly. Your ballot cannot be handled by an unauthorized third party (i.e., a friend, neighbor, girlfriend/boyfriend, roommate, etc.) Further, your ballot cannot be left at the back door of City Hall, stuffed under the door of the Clerk’s office, given to a non-Clerk City staff member, or otherwise left unattended. Doing these things will result in the ballot being rejected. Absentee ballots must be delivered to the City Clerk’s office at City Hall (25 Cottage Road) in one of the designated ways: by mail, returned by the voter (you may use the dropbox that will be available in the back of City Hall), delivered directly to the Clerk by the voter or a member of the voter’s immediate family or by a third person the voter has designated on their application to handle the ballot.

Note that the information above does not address ballots that are not received by the deadline. Ballots that are not received by the deadline are rejected – but this is rarely due to errors with the mail. It is most often because voters do not return their ballot at all. All ballots must be received by 8:00pm on Election Day in order to be counted. To ensure your ballot is delivered on time, make sure you mail your ballot back at least 7 days before election day, or if you prefer, you can drop off your ballot at the City Clerk’s office at 25 Cottage Road (an outside dropbox will be available monitored by security camera).

How am I notified if my ballot is rejected?

Returned absentee ballots are collected daily by Clerk staff and the envelopes are examined as they are returned to check for any discrepancies. If any are found that cause the ballot to be rejected, clerk staff will attempt to contact the voter by phone or email within 24 hours. To correct the defect, the voter must mark and submit a new ballot. We will issue a duplicate ballot in the manner requested by the voter. We will do this even if we are not able to contact the voter. The newly issued ballot has to be returned by election day at 8pm.
How do I know that my ballot has been received and will be counted?

As of September 10, 2020, for this upcoming November election, the City Clerk’s office (a staff of 5) has received and accepted 5,888 absentee ballot requests from South Portland voters, with requests coming in every day. We track every ballot – as it requested, is issued, and when it is returned and processed. If you request your ballot electronically, you receive a confirmation email when your ballot request has been accepted.

The Secretary of State has launched a website for voters to be able to track the status of their ballot (you must know your voter ID number): https://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data/index.html. Voters who return their ballot by mail can choose to affix a tracking label to their ballot return envelope – this will not invalidate the ballot (do not cover up your signature or the bar code label). You can also ensure your ballot is delivered on time by returning it directly using our new dropbox that will be installed outside in the back of City Hall later this month. You may also choose to vote absentee in person, which will be available at City Hall when ballots arrive (around October 3). For the November election, the last day to request an absentee ballot without special circumstances is Friday, October 30.

Absentee voting is a tried and true method of voting in Maine – it is not a new system. Voters should feel confident that their ballot will be received and counted as long as they follow the directions included with the absentee ballot, which include reminders to sign the back of the envelope, and return the ballot by election day at 8pm (and if returning by mail, to mail it at least 7 days prior to election day).

Finally, absentee ballots are counted in public, so you can always come watch the process. Information about when and where absentee ballots will be counted will be posted on the City’s website in the next few weeks.

Emily Scully, City Clerk, South Portland