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Secretary of State Jim Condos Announces Election Law Changes to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic

Montpelier, VT – Today Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos announced a series of temporary changes to Vermont’s election laws passed by the Legislature and signed into law by the Governor, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that Vermont is prepared to safeguard the integrity of elections and the public’s health in the face of this global pandemic.

“Fair and free elections are the foundation of our democracy,” said Secretary Condos. “These temporary changes to Vermont’s election laws will allow us to be nimble, and adapt our elections process to ensure every eligible voter who wishes to vote can cast their ballot safely, without increasing exposure or putting their health and the health of other voters, election workers, and candidates at further risk.”

The Vermont Secretary of State’s office had previously issued recommendations to the Legislature on temporary changes to Vermont’s election laws during the 2020 COVID-19 health crisis and response. Secretary Condos, Deputy Secretary of State Chris Winters, and Elections Director Will Senning worked with legislators, legislative committees of jurisdiction, and the Governor’s office on an elections bill, [H.681](#), which was passed by the Legislature and signed into law by the Governor on March 30th.

Changes include the waiving of candidate petition signature gathering requirements for the August statewide primary elections and November General elections. All candidates wishing to appear on the ballot will still be required to file financial disclosure statements and consent of candidate forms.

“Eliminating the requirement for candidates to collect signatures for petitions is necessary in this time when we are sheltering at home, avoiding gatherings, and avoiding unnecessary contact with other people,” said Elections Director Will Senning. “We all have a responsibility to limit our exposure and contact based on recommendations by the Vermont Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This common-sense measure will help keep candidates and voters safe.”

The new law empowers municipal legislative bodies to change upcoming local elections during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis from floor meetings to Australian ballot, without requiring a full vote of the town.

“As we plan for all outcomes with our local, state, and federal partners, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Vermont’s Town and City Clerks, who keep the front doors to our democracy open for Vermont voters,” said Secretary Condos. “Their jobs, like many of us, have taken on an increasing difficulty in these trying times, and I look forward to working with them, and supporting their offices, planning for our 2020 elections.”

Lastly, this new temporary law also creates emergency powers to allow the Secretary of State's office, with the agreement of the Governor, to enact the necessary measures to enable Vermonters to vote safely during the 2020 COVID-19 health crisis. Such measures could include the mailing of ballots to every registered voter, an extended cutoff for Clerks to receive voted ballots, an expanded window for Clerks to process voted ballots, the creation of secure ballot return stations, or the moving of polling locations, as examples.

"We hope to not have to make any changes to Vermont's election procedures, but that would be a very optimistic outlook," said Secretary Condos. "We have no idea what this health emergency will look like in one month, 5 months, or 8, and so we need to be planning now to make sure that voters can still vote, and that our democracy can still thrive during crisis."

Secretary Condos continued, "whatever options we decide to use will only be enacted after carefully consultation with our federal, state and local partners. Planning at all levels, starting now, will be crucial to our success. No one should have to choose between protecting their health and exercising their right to vote. This virus has disrupted our lives in so many ways, but it does not have to disrupt our democratic process."

For more information and guidance on elections during the COVID-19 state of emergency, visit the Elections Division COVID-19 Response page on the Vermont Secretary of State's website at <https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/about/covid-19-response/>.

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