BUTTE COUNTY CLERK RECORDER STREAMLINES MAIL–IN BALLOT OPENING, DECREASING LABOR NEEDS BY 60%

Investing in the OPEX® Model 72™ automated ballot opener and extractor allowed Butte County to efficiently open all mail-in ballots while achieving an ROI of three weeks.

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// THE BACKGROUND

As of 2022, there were 124,000 registered voters in Butte County, California. The entire county mails ballots to all registered voters and has voter assistance centers available 11 days prior to an election. Mail-in ballots are sent to all registered voters 29 days before every election, giving the county the ability to open, process, and tabulate mail-in ballots in time for election day. Voter turnout peaked during the 2020 general election at 83% with 104,151 mail-in ballots, but continues to increase on average each year. This makes it crucial for the county to have an effective ballot opening and extraction system in place. Butte County Clerk Recorder received around 72,000 mail-in ballots plus roughly 1,000 ballots from voter assistance centers during the 2022 general election, which was around a 60% voter turnout.

// THE CHALLENGE

Before automating with the OPEX® Model 72™ automated ballot opener and extraction system, mail-in ballots were grouped into batches of 200 and then given to one of three "opening boards." Each batch of 200 had to be opened by the opening board, who would separate the ballots from the return envelopes by hand. Envelopes were bagged and assigned a number, then ballots were placed in a bin with their audit paperwork and sent to the tabulation room. Each opening board consisted of three people, plus a supervisor to oversee all opening boards, which was ten staff members total. Unfortunately, the county had trouble with turnover and was left with enough staff for only two opening boards. Mail-in ballot envelopes were opened by hand with letter openers, which was time-consuming and posed risk for error and damage to the ballots. They could only process an average of 1,000 ballots in a typical day, occasionally reaching 1,800 ballots per day with perfect ballots and no recounts.

// KEY CHALLENGES

MANUALLY OPENING AND PROCESSING MAIL-IN BALLOTS CREATED A HUGE RISK FOR ERROR

MANUAL MAIL-IN BALLOT PROCESSING IS A SLOW, TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS

OPENING BALLOTS BY HAND INCREASES THE RISK OF BALLOTS BEING CUT OR DAMAGED

// KEY RESULTS

5,000
MAIL-IN BALLOTS
OPENED PER DAY

60%
DECREASE IN LABOR
NEEDED TO PROCESS
MAIL-IN BALLOTS

16,000
MAIL-IN BALLOTS
COUNTED ON
ELECTION NIGHT

3
WEEKS TO ACHIEVE
A RETURN ON
INVESTMENT

// THE SOLUTION

While looking for a new solution to help alleviate challenges with mail-in ballot processing, the staff from Butte County Clerk Recorder attended an elections conference, where they were able to see the OPEX Model 72 automated ballot opener and extraction system in action. After seeing the Model 72 system quickly and safely open mail-in ballots, Butte County invested in the system to process the county's mail-in ballots with the help of the Equalis Group.

With the Model 72 system first in place, Butte County was able to complete a batch of 200 ballots within eight minutes. After staff members were able to adjust to using the system over time, batches were complete in roughly five and a half minutes, nearly three minutes faster when automation was first implemented. This included verification, opening, folding, and bagging done simultaneously with opening.

A record 5,000 ballots on average were opened a day during the 2022 general election, compared to the previous rate of 1,000 ballots in a typical day. On election night alone, Butte County was able to open 16,000 ballots using the Model 72 system. In addition, since only three to four people were needed to process mail-in ballots, the savings in labor costs paid for the new system within three weeks.

// THE FUTURE

Due to the success of the 2020 election season, Butte County anticipates voter turnout to continue increasing. Registered voters are also expected to mail ballots in earlier for future elections. With the new rapid ballot extraction solution from OPEX in place, Butte County can easily handle expected voter turnout while continuing to improve mail-in ballot opening efficiency and saving money for taxpayers.

"IT SAVED US SO MUCH TIME AND REDUCED THE STAFF NEEDED. THE SYSTEM WAS VERY EASY TO WORK WITH. WE LOVE THE [OPEX MODEL 72] SYSTEM."

-Madison Wyman, CERA
Assistant County Clerk – Recorder

"THE [MODEL 72] SYSTEM PAID FOR ITSELF WITHIN THREE WEEKS, NOT EVEN A FULL ELECTION CYCLE."

-Madison Wyman, CERA
Assistant County Clerk – Recorder

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