COLLIER COUNTY RELIES ON EFFECTIVE BALLOT OPENING AUTOMATION TO COUNT ALL MAIL-IN BALLOTS BY ELECTION DAY

Implementing Two OPEX® Model 72™ Automated Ballot Opener and Extractor Systems Helps to Speed Up Ballot Processing
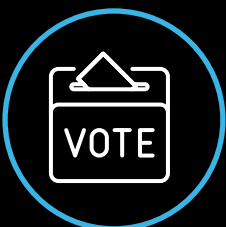
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// THE BACKGROUND

Collier County, located in South Florida, has over 253,830 registered voters as of the 2022 November election. In 2005, Collier County was one of many counties leading the way for voters to vote through mail. Anyone residing in the county can request a ballot to vote-by-mail without an excuse, which creates a surge of votes that need to be counted in time by the Supervisor of Elections (SOE) office by election day. At the time, Collier County SOE had very limited space for over 30 temporary staff members who worked around 6' tables to open mail-in ballots using table-top mail joggers and letter openers. According to current Florida law, elections centers can receive permission up to 20 days before the election to start opening ballots as they are received.

// THE CHALLENGE

This manual ballot opening process posed many challenges for Collier County SOE. Ballot opening was time-consuming and labor-intensive, which created a time-crunch for the county to count all ballots before the election day deadline without delay. A large amount of processing is required before the mail-in ballots are opened, making it crucial for the opening process to go smoothly to prevent any more time from being lost. Faced with these challenges, the Collier County SOE wanted to implement a better solution for inbound mail that not only improved the efficiency of how ballots are processed, but would also cut costs for taxpayers by reducing the overall cost of vote-by-mail ballot processing.
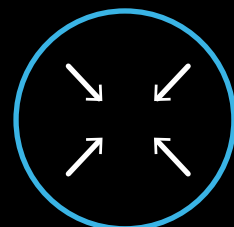
// KEY CHALLENGES

BALLOT OPENING IS TIME-CONSUMING AND LABOR-INTENSIVE

MANUAL BALLOT PROCESSING AND OPENING CAN LEAD TO A TIME-CRUNCH BEFORE THE ELECTION DEADLINE

SPACE WAS LIMITED FOR OVER 30 TEMPORARY EMPLOYEES TO OPEN BALLOTS

// KEY RESULTS

2
STAFF MEMBERS NEEDED TO OPEN
AND EXTRACT ALL BALLOTS

2.5
DAYS NEEDED TO COUNT 50%
OF THE BALLOTS RECEIVED

>60K
BALLOTS COUNTED DURING THE
2022 NOVEMBER ELECTION

// THE SOLUTION

After attending an elections conference in California, Collier County SOE discovered OPEX® mail and ballot opening and extraction equipment, which was also being used in the Collier County Tax Collector's Office for opening inbound mail. Collier County SOE originally invested in an OPEX Model 51 mail opening system, then soon upgraded to two Model 72™ mail and ballot opening and extraction systems. They first used the system for mixed envelope mail processing, including voter registration requests, before utilizing the system for mail-in ballots. The Model 72 system significantly improved the way the SOE opened the outer envelope, helping to protect the inner contents and maintain ballot integrity. The Model 72 also helped with voter anonymity, as the opened envelopes are presented to the operator with the voter's information facing away from the operator at an angle. The operators then removed the ballot from the envelope in one sweep as the system verified that all contents had been removed from each envelope.

After implementing the OPEX ballot opening solution, Collier County SOE was able to reduce its staff by 93%. Originally, Collier County SOE needed around 30 temporary employees working overtime to count all ballots on time. Now, they only need two full-time employees who can open and extract all the ballots using the OPEX equipment within standard working hours. Ballot extraction and layouts can be done simultaneously, significantly speeding up the tabulation process. During the 2022 November election, Collier County SOE counted a total of 60,154 mail-in ballots that needed to be carefully opened by two employees. Each employee can open an average of 8,000 ballots per day, totaling an average of 16,000 ballots a day opened by the SOE. During the 2020

general election, Collier County opened a total of 103,006 vote-by-mail ballots. In two and a half days alone during the 2020 general election, Collier County was able to open around 50,000 ballots.

> "IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR US TO HAVE A SOLUTION THAT CONTINUED TO SUPPORT THE INTEGRITY OF OUR ELECTIONS WHILE SAVING COSTS FOR OUR TAXPAYERS."
>
> **-Eric West**
> Vote-by-Mail Director, Collier County SOE

> "IF ANYTHING GOES WRONG WITH THE EQUIPMENT, OUR OPEX® SERVICE TECH IS THERE WITHIN 24 HOURS TO HELP FIX THE PROBLEM."
>
> **-Kerry Black**
> Vote-by-Mail Supervisor, Collier County SOE

// THE FUTURE

In anticipation for the 2024 election, Collier County is predicting that the number of mail-in ballots it receives will continue to grow as voting-by-mail continues to be popular with Florida residents. With an effective and reliable automation solution in place, Collier County SOE can continue to effectively open and count all ballots on time before the deadline of each election, saving taxpayers from unnecessary expenditures in all future elections.

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