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# Ballot Drop Boxes Go Up in Flames

Kevin Ruiz, Volunteer Reporter

Just a week before Election Day, Oct. 28, Greg Kimsey, an election official working in Vancouver, Wash., received a call at 5:30 in the morning that a ballot box was up in flames at the Fishers Landing Transit Center. Kimsey arrived at the transit center to see 494 ballots on the ground burned and wet.

“I will always remember driving from the site to the elections office with those damaged ballots in the trunk of my car and my initial, my just immediate response was, this is heartbreaking. This is a direct attack on democracy,” Kimsey said.

This was one of two burned ballot box incidents that occurred on the same day. The other happened just 15 minutes down the street in Portland, Ore.

“What we’re hearing from voters is that they’re angry... I think the people who may not have voted in this election will now be motivated to vote,” Kimsey said.

Both incidents are currently being investigated by the FBI. Kimsey and other officials were able to retrieve the contact information for 488 ballots, with only 143 ballots in need of a replacement. According to Kimsey, as of Wednesday of last week, the Clark County election office was working to get these voters a replacement ballot in time for Election Day.

Due to these events, Clark County increased the presence of law enforcement around its 22 ballot boxes.

“It’s not like we’re going to have a uniform officer standing there or anything all day long, but they are increasing the number of times that they drive by,” Kimsey said.



Ahmed Abdirashid Abdullah

On top of this, the county created a program called “Drop box observers” to help prevent future incidents leading up to Election Day.

“Where there will be a person present at every ballot drop box we have, and 24 hours a day through Election Day,” Kimsey explained, while reiterating that the presence is for the safety of the voters. “They’re not to confront anyone, but if they see something suspicious, to call 911.”

Clark County wasn’t the only county ramping up security presence in the lead-up to Tuesday’s election. Here in Seattle, King County officials worked with local law enforcement agencies leading up to the election for additional safety checks at ballot drop boxes and voting centers.

Halei Watkins, communications manager at the King County election office, emphasized the county’s election safety efforts.

“We haven’t seen anything suspicious yet here in King County, but we are prepared should anything suspicious pop up,” Watkins said.

When Watkins found out about the incidents in Vancouver and Portland, her immediate thoughts were about voters.

“Those are people’s votes. They’re people’s voices. I think it’s especially heartbreaking to us as election administrators,” Watkins said.

In 2016, there were just 16 drop boxes across all of King County. Now there are 85. Ballot drop boxes are equipped with two fire stops, and are being emptied out at least once a day, with additional pickups during the final stretch of elections, to ensure maximum ballot security. These drop boxes weigh over 1,000 pounds when empty, and are even equipped to take the impact of a school bus.

“Several years ago, a school bus hit our drop box. The drop box didn’t move and was barely scratched. Meanwhile, the school bus was heavily damaged, and needed quite a bit of work,” Watkins said.

Regardless of the incidents, Watkins expected voters to come out and use King County ballot drop boxes as normal.

“We’re certainly hearing from a handful of folks that they just felt better about walking their ballot into our building and dropping it off with us,” Watkins said. “Voters will not be deterred from using our drop boxes.”

However, threats such as these fires do affect the mindset of voters.

“The more the voters trust the voting system, the more comfortable they will be in accepting the results, even if they don’t like the results,” Political Science Professor Patrick Schoettmer, who is currently holding a class on the election at Seattle University, said. “When you have these things like fires, it can be something that can motivate people to fight back, but it can also be something that undermines people’s confidence in the election system.”

On Election Day, people in Vancouver, Wash. waited for over two hours to cast their ballots in person at voting centers, due to concerns of the incidents that occurred last week. Yet the concerns don’t stop there, Schoettmer believes foreign concerns are just as important.

“But here in the 21st century, we’re not only worried about shenanigans domestically, we’re worried about potential foreign actors as well, trying to influence the outcome of the election,” Schoettmer said.

False bomb threats made on election night across five swing states were linked to Russian email domains.

With the election concluded, ballot security won’t be at the forefront of our minds, but these attacks are a reminder of how important these issues are and the problems we potentially face in the future of our political landscape.

