

# Citing big vote, Pima hires firm to mail early ballots

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Anticipated record turnout plus a lack of staff and space has prompted Pima County Recorder F. Ann Rodriguez to outsource the mailing of early ballots for the September primary and November general elections to a private company.

Rodriguez said Wednesday she had selected the Tempe-based Runbeck Election Services to handle the mailing of up to 200,000 early ballots for the September primary and 300,000 early ballots for the November general election.

"We don't have the staff or the time," Rodriguez said.

Runbeck already prints ballots under a contract for Pima County elections.

Rodriguez said the county will pay about \$1.50 for each early ballot assembled and mailed. The county will pay the postal costs, she added.

The lack of staff to process the early ballots plus a shortage of storage space forced the outsourcing, Rodriguez said.

The county, not Runbeck, will tabulate the early ballot results.

"The ballots will be returned directly to Pima County," Rodriguez said.

Vote security has become an issue both in Pima County and nationwide as critics of electronic vote systems and ballot tabulating equipment have shown that some computer vote systems can be hacked and votes changed.

Last year, the Pima County Democratic Party sued the county, seeking to obtain all of the county's past electronic vote databases to search for security vulnerabilities and signs of abnormalities in vote processing.

Rodriguez said she visited Runbeck with observers from political parties, to look at the operation firsthand, including company security procedures and equipment.

Security includes "multiple cameras on-site" where ballots will be assembled and printed with security personnel present. The early ballots mailed by the company to voters can be tracked by the U.S. Postal Service, Rodriguez said.

One of the political party observers who accompanied Rodriguez to the company offices was Jim March, a representative for the Arizona Libertarian Party.

March also is a technical adviser to the Pima County Democrats in their suit against Pima County.

March, in a nine-page report to the Libertarian Party, gave the company credit for instituting tight security precautions at its plant.

But March said the brief tour of the facility did not answer all his concerns, and recommended more research into "how their data handling operates, how their process flow really works, and what audit logs or other debris is left that can be analyzed as public records."