

## From the Director's Desk:

### **Elections: What are the actual threats?**

It's time to check-in with your County Clerk

There are multiple threats to the integrity of the election this year.

NWCCOG spoke with Janice Vos Caudill, Pitkin County Clerk and Recorder who just completed a primary election on June 30 to ask her about the challenges of running an election and to put into perspective what we are hearing from the national news. Asked about threats to the integrity of the election which have her concerned, she said, "Number one is cybersecurity. In 2016 there were 21 states that the Russians attempted to hack and two were breached. At a state level we use a centralized database, and we have had trainings. We have backups."

Unlike other states with regulations that result in mandatory in-person voting at a day-of precinct location, and regulations that result in many provisional ballots which require verification in the days following an election, rule of thumb in Colorado has been that "after ballots drop, a third are returned the next week, another third are sent the week before the election and the day before election day the last third show up." This allows county level teams to begin processing ballots on a rolling basis well ahead of election day. This has multiple benefits, less pressure, more time for trouble-shooting and more accurate first returns for the clerk. For voters, more options, and the ability to take the time to fully research while voting from their kitchen table.

Caudill is not apprehensive about what seems to be of national concern-the integrity of mail-in ballots. Coloradoans have embraced mail-in ballots, and less than 5% still go to the polls. Caudill describes how from the first day ballots are sent out (Sept 18, 45 days ahead for overseas ballots), "we are live" with the state system, and voters can go into the system to check their registration and see all touches made to a mail-in ballot." She said people come into the office who say they are travelling, and we let them vote. The Colorado Secretary of State is now working with a vendor, notes Caudill, who will provide text updates tracking your ballot with messages for when it was put in the mail to you, when your ballot was received by the County Clerk's office, and when the party judges agree the signature is legitimate and will be counted."



**Hackers:** [The Oregonian](#) (AP) reports that "federal authorities say one of the gravest threats to the November Election is a well-timed ransomware attack that could paralyze

voting operations." While threats from other nations "meddling" in the election messaging or doing coordinated disruptions remain a concern again at a national level, the threat to state and local governments networks is something they should be concerned about every day. Leading up to the election, both the FBI and [Department of Homeland Security](#) have issued advisories about ransomware attacks. The AP story referenced above quotes Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold who notes that Colorado, for example stores redundant versions of it's voter registration data at two separate locations, with regular backups of each, and that officials practice going back and forth in case they need to do so. Caudill notes that "Colorado is the number one model that other states watch. We are number 2 in highest turnout, number three in registered voters and number 4 in shortest wait times." She attributes that to years of collaboration between the 64 County Clerks and the Secretary of State's office that have led to the 2013 legislation that enabled statewide mail in balloting and early voting while other states are still dealing with old fashioned precinct voting and the sign in poll books that were common in Colorado more than a decade ago.

**COVID:** Asked about adaptations due to COVID Caudill's team has moved to larger venues for the vote centers, brought in plexiglass for stations. They sanitize the voting booth after each voter (hard to imagine doing this in a situation like we saw this year in Wisconsin). For the June 30<sup>th</sup> primary, she noted, "at the voter service center numbers were lower than usual. People were respectful and thankful, especially because they saw us cleaning after each voter." Caudill acknowledged that they will step up their information campaign about other options in coming months. This is not an option in many states that have not made the reforms which Colorado has made. It is a misnomer that we have a "national" election. What we actually have is an election conducted by eight thousand distinct jurisdictions.

**Volunteer Election Judges:** Though it is not a "threat" it takes thousands of volunteers to put on an election and the COVID situation puts a fine point on this challenge. Caudill notes concern for election judges "who are over 60 and 70 years-old." While most Counties in our region have year-round staff who specialize in elections, many counties rely on stalwart help from the community that shows up for a very long day, often remaining until all ballots are counted and re-counted. This year's pandemic means finding a new group of willing helpers who aren't at a high risk for this work and/or taking extra precautions. For those of you who are not at public health risk, please consider being a local election judge. It is about as patriotic a thing as you can do, and we have relied for too long on older Americans for these basic roles. It's time to pass the baton. The Pitkin County Clerk has a [two-step on-line application](#) for election judges with the basic information, rules, roles and requirements, and Eagle County has a [similar page](#).



### **Lack of Access to Voting Options During a Pandemic:**

Colorado Clerks have an advantage of early voting which can help with social distancing during the pandemic, not to mention mail-in ballots, many of which arrive and can begin to be processed days before Election Day. Many Counties also have secure "drive by" outdoor ballot drop locations so that voters don't have to enter the building with a mail-in ballot, and don't have to risk putting it in the mail. In Colorado, voters can bypass it altogether. If your jurisdiction doesn't have such a drop

box, consider installing one ASAP, and let voters know about it. Caudill noted that Pitkin

will be encouraging mail in voters to use the drop box so they can be assured "we received it immediately." Each of these options takes some of the pressure off a possible IT/Cyber breakdown on Election Day, while providing multiple options in time and place for voters. It also significantly de-pressurizes in-person voting for those who prefer it-even during a pandemic. The other reason for a drop box, those last-minute voters who use the post office risk not being counted. This is one of the risks being assessed nationally. If you have not heard, the US Postal Service is being set up to be a scapegoat. This is a good year to put a communications full-court press on dropping off "mail in" ballots directly to the town or county polling place. Because of COVID, Summit County clerk's [webpage](#) is "strongly encourage" voters to vote by mail and use the 24-hr drop box.

**Politics in Other States:** To Colorado (and 4 other states with mail in balloting), well done. To contrast to other states, [Vox](#) reports how many states without mail-in ballots and many which don't have "no-excuse" absentee balloting are "scrambling," stating that "experts warn the country is not ready for the November election." Vox headlines the story as "[The slow-motion 2020 election disaster states are scrambling to prevent, explained.](#)" It is a good read. Colorado entities should be positioned to be very proud of how they have prepared for elections.

**Misinformation:** Caudill says, "I think this is right up there with Cybersecurity and COVID. I could spend all my time and then some on this right now," she says, comparing the misinformation problem to "chasing firetrucks." She is hoping the community understands the "trusted resource our office provides," but she says, "we are dealing with a lot of misinformation especially on mail-in ballots right now." This is a national issue that existed before the pandemic or the 2020 election cycle. For one, it had a significant impact on the 2016 election. This year the problem couldn't be surging at a worse time. David Leonhardt with the NYT had an interesting take on why the U.S. is suffering the proliferation of deliberate "[Virus disinformation](#)" in the media . Absorbed as truth by close to 40% of Americans, misinformation this year has systematically downplayed the virus, effected national policy and is echoed in social media sites which do nothing to put it in check. Leonhardt says Canada, Japan and Europe "have no equivalent" to this mainstream media dynamic of providing misinformation. Research from Pew, reported by Margaret Sullivan, columnist for the Washington Post implicates that "[This was the week America lost the war on misinformation.](#)" One culprit according to the report? Facebook, and the growing number of Americans who "rely on social media as their pathway to news (who) are more ignorant and more misinformed than those who come to news through print, a news app on their phones or network TV." Those people "are more likely than other Americans to have heard about a number of false or unproven claims."

**Where the System May Break:** The unthinkable is something many are beginning to think about, a crisis of peaceful succession. In the book [Will He Go](#), Lawrence Douglas overlays scenarios which have occurred in the past that with closely contested elections, and how those scenarios which have no clear answer in law or the Constitution may play out differently with the current personality in power. He is hardly the only one thinking that through. [The Atlantic](#) reports a recent bipartisan war-game exercise by an independent think tank simulating the 2020 election which unmasked key vulnerabilities. It is a scary, important read. One of the most important national elections in recent history is occurring in less than 100 days, and there are a whole lot of folks in the wings now talking about what might happen if it is a close race, and the integrity of the election is called into question by the executive branch ([Vox](#), [Politico](#), [Newsweek](#)). This is not far-fetched. The president in 2016 openly questioned the validity of the vote saying that he won the popular vote. He did not. In the lead up to November, scenarios are proliferating. I spoke with a Congressional staffer who said that there is already open talk in D.C. about "which side" the Pentagon would "back" in a contested election? Most of us still don't want to contemplate this question but informed people are discussing banana republic scenarios.

Locally, we can't do much about this, but it is increasingly important to see it as part of the

backdrop that the public will take in which will in itself lower trust and the integrity of the vote.

**Translation for Local elections:** For those of you who have a Town or County Clerk who asks for additional resources for this November election, please say "Yes" and understand that you don't want your county or municipality to be a news story in mid-November. Carrying out an election as competently and quietly as you perform hundreds of other vital services without question or comment may be the most important thing a local jurisdiction does this fall.

### **Masks, Compliance, and your People.**

Pitkin County Commissioner Patti Clapper forwarded the following quote from Ann Mullins, Aspen City Council, "Unfortunately, I'm seeing more confrontational behavior, whether it's on the trails or even today in the grocery store. This is a really, really stressful time and I would say to keep having patience and understand that your good day may be somebody else's worst day."

Around the region, word of mouth and anecdotal evidence is that visitors are adhering to local health orders with varying degrees of civility towards the local businesses and public or private employees who remind them to wear a mask and of other protocols local businesses and officials have worked studiously to develop. Mask wearing should be as mundane as slowing down through a construction zone, which is a good meta-message in seeing it on portable highway reader boards and CDOT Variable Message Boards noting COVID compliance alongside fire restrictions. It seems so sensible from here.



NPR in "[Can Masks Save Us from More Lockdowns? Here's What the Science Says](#)" cited a study that found that if 95% of Americans wore a mask that statistically speaking it is possible that the 30% transmission reduction could mean that the entire country "could re-open." NPR also noted the biggest sign of a shift which was the President now referring to wearing masks as "patriotic." Governor Polis in recent weeks reluctantly issued a statewide mask mandate, while imposing a curfew on bars at 10 pm. The Governor in that reluctance, has largely avoided political battles with mayors which hasn't been the case with his peers in, for instance, Idaho and Georgia. Governors know they will be in tough, controversial, front-line situations, now we are asking that of retail workers.

Being in a regulatory role is no fun. It also matters. A lot. This is one reason I have such a heart for anyone in a public role, mayors to utility clerks-now hourly workers at local businesses. Nobody sane ever says I want to retire and become a code enforcement officer. Now, we are asking 20-30-year old retail employees and front-line public employees in their first "real job" to do just that. A whole lot of people are learning what it is like to confront citizens and visitors on critically important, yet controversial public policy that more than a few righteously believe infringes on their freedoms. Few public employees are coached in what Police would call "de-escalation," perhaps that needs to change.

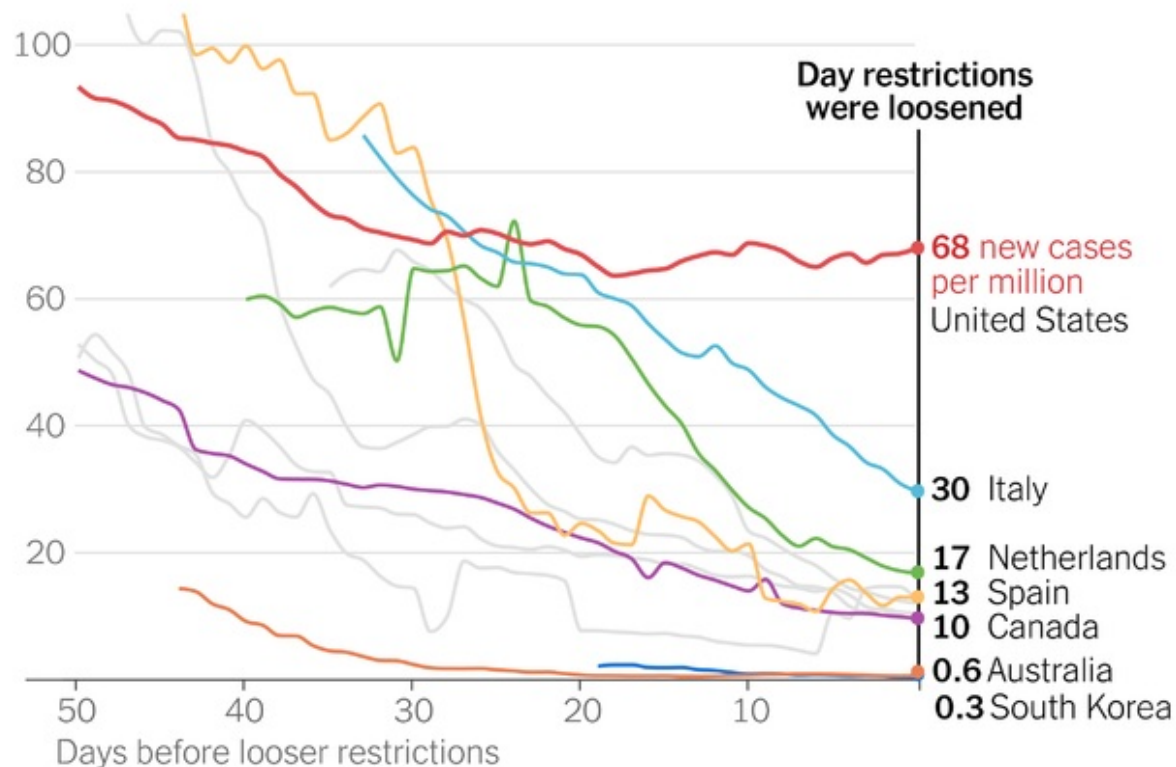
One factor impacting employee morale noted by Winter Park Town Manager, Keith Reisberg is "an elevated level of animosity or antagonism ... which we attribute to uncertainty." He says he is doing more this year to remind employees of the importance of being understanding and reminding them that there are resources available when compassion isn't.

## And Now the Bad News: COVID Surge in U.S. is not good for the Tourist Economy

The Washington Post reports that Coronavirus is making a [comeback around the world](#), surging in places that had flattened the curve, and ominously, is most out of control across the Southern Hemisphere, which of course is experiencing winter. In an unwelcome change, the United States, Brazil and India are fueling the pandemic's growth with those three countries "accounting for 2/3 of the new cases reported globally this past week."

COVID deaths in America surpassed 150,000 deaths with a surge of 10,000 deaths over the past 11 days reported [Reuters](#) on July 29th, and some countries, including the European Union are requiring U.S. citizens to quarantine ([CNN](#), [The Hill](#)).

### The U.S. re-opened with more coronavirus cases



Note: Includes all countries with a GDP per capita of more than \$25,000 that have a population of at least 10 million people. Japan and Sweden never reached a high enough stringency level to be included on the chart.

By The New York Times | Sources: Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker, New York Times database from state and local governments.

Why does this matter locally? It probably matters less with regards to the election than to our economy. Sara Ott, Aspen Town Manager, noted, "our revenues for the year are trending 25% down," and a recovery "depends a lot on capacity on the mountain, which will be one driver, as will border restrictions (at a national level) "since our winter tourist population has a larger international component and has a higher spend per visit." The between the lines point? Don't think the mixed messaging will not have an effect on our resort economy as those around the world consider whether to visit this winter. Those visitors are the economic cornerstone of resort communities. We may look at our local stats and policy, which have largely been exemplary, but many of our visitors are unlikely to drill down that far. The national story is that the US is not managing this crisis, and that cases are on the rise, and the data currently supports that narrative. Can local Chambers and governments working together provide communications that cuts through that? That is yet to be seen. As of this summer, the visitors that we depend upon are coming anyhow, at least from around the U.S.

### A Shift (Again) from a Tourism Economy to a Lifestyle Economy?

That is a sub-headline in a [Colorado Sun](#) article about the surge in real estate sales in the high country. It may be a trend, but Town Managers I've spoken with are so far reluctant to say one reason that some places are trending "flat" rather than down with regard to sales tax this year in places such as Basalt, Snowmass Village and Kremmling is that citizens are spending locally, and that many second homes are occupied for months at a time rather than weeks at a time. Cordillera Property Owners Association manager, Rachel Oys says their more than 500 homes have been over 90% occupied this summer. Chris Romer with the Vail Valley Partnership notes that while many sectors are getting by or struggling, realtors are "over the moon" right now.

The Washington Post had an interesting story, "[Eleven ways the Pandemic will Change Travel.](#)"

**On a lighter note** (unless you are a local police department considering drones), Slate "[Topless Beach Scandal](#)" reports on a police department that is reconsidering using drones as an enforcement tool at a local topless beach. It isn't the worst police story to come out of Minneapolis this summer. It is a funny story on the very serious privacy concerns of citizens.

New content

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## 5 Commitments Reminder

This from Adam Palmer, the Sustainable Communities Director for Eagle County - worth a quick viewing as a reminder of the 5 commitments - it only takes one minute.

[CLICK HERE](#)

**[See NWCCOG Coronavirus Resource Guide here](#)**

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*News is developing as fast as the speed of the spread of the virus. For the next few weeks - hopefully not months -- we'll publish more frequently as needed to get the most current information to our members. If you have information you think should be shared on this newsletter, please send suggested content to [jstavney@nwccog.org](mailto:jstavney@nwccog.org).*

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