Jersey 'Vote By Mail' bill heads to the governor's desk

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Legislation to create the state's first vote by mail law today gained final legislative approval by the Assembly on a vote for concurrence with amendments made in the Senate.

The legislation is sponsored by Assembly members Joan Quigley, Jack Conners and Paul Moriarty.

"Choosing who to vote for can be a confusing and stressful process," said Quigley (D-Hudson). "Casting a ballot shouldn't. be. Moving to a true vote by mail system will make it easier for people to exercise their right to vote and increase public participation in the democratic process."

The Quigley/Conners/Moriarty measure (S-1380/A-2451) would repeal all absentee ballot statutes on the books in New Jersey, replacing them with simpler, more streamlined vote-by-mail procedures.

Since 2005, New Jersey has permitted any registered voter to cast an absentee ballot in any election for any reason. According to the sponsors, that system has presented undue confusion for both voters and election workers during recent elections.

"Public excitement about voting has been reenergized in New Jersey," said Conners (D-Camden/Burlington). "This excitement cannot be allowed to wither and die because of a lack of understanding or confusion over voting rights."

The bill would do away with civilian and military absentee ballots, replacing them with a single, standardized mail-in ballot for use by any registered voter wishing to vote by mail.

Registered voters would be given the option to select to vote by mail for one calendar year or for all future general elections. Once such a request is made, a county board of elections would be required to send a ballot to the voter without the need for further requests.

The measure also would set a clear schedule for county clerks to follow when fulfilling a mail-in ballot request. The schedule would ensure that requests for mail-in ballots are honored in a timely fashion.

Under the bill, any person who applies for a mail-in ballot but does not receive it, has the application rejected or fails to mail a completed ballot back to the county board of elections would be permitted to vote via provisional ballot on Election Day.

To ensure the security of the new mail-in ballots, the bill would require that the statewide voter registration system have the ability to:

-Record and monitor all requests for mail-in ballots;
-Enable county boards of election to verify the identity and signature of every person requesting a mail-in ballot;
-Record the name and address of each voter determined to be eligible to receive a mail-in ballot for a specific election; and
-Note when a mail-in ballot has been delivered to a voter by mail or hand delivery.

It would further require this information be made available to the Secretary of State so that voters can be notified when the application for a mail-in ballot has been accepted or rejected and, when rejected, the reasons for the rejection.

"We need a simple, easy and accessible system to encourage people to vote, especially for those who typically cannot make it to the polls," said Moriarty (D-Gloucester). "This system can do just that while providing the proper oversight and most would agree that's a good thing."

The Assembly voted 45-28, with three abstentions, to agree with amendments made in the Senate. It now goes to the Governor who may sign it, veto it or modify it in the form of a conditional veto.

— ANDY LAGOMARSINO, NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM