Comments by Laurie Sica, Municipal Clerk – to Assembly Committee of the Whole, March 19, 2007

Ordinance 2007-02 would allow the Municipal Clerk to conduct an election by-mail. This ordinance change was requested by the Municipal Clerk's office to provide a new tool for the management of elections in the city and borough of Juneau. The goal is to provide good customer service to the voter, and to facilitate the conduct of elections.

By-mail elections have been conducted by the State of Alaska, and a few boroughs, including the Kenai Peninsula Borough and the Fairbanks North Star Borough. At the last Municipal Clerk’s conference in November, we conducted an educational session on by-mail elections, as there was great interest from clerks across the state in this method of voting.

When I heard discussion of a possible special election regarding the new high school last December, I thought it might be timely to investigate this method of voting for Juneau. In my limited experience as election official, special elections can be problematic in that voters are less aware an election is taking place due to the changed date of the election, and it can be more difficult to find workers for precinct polls and boards. The intention of providing ballots by-mail to voters is that they could reach voters who may be busy with spring and summer activities, and the number of workers required to conduct the election is reduced.

When drafting the legislation, Mr. Hartle suggested that we allow the option of conducting a by-mail election for regular elections as well as special elections, as we may find that voters prefer to vote by mail. I believe he made this suggestion because all changes to the election code require “pre-clearance” (which is Non-Objection) by the Department of Justice Voting Rights Section. If we included both types of elections in the ordinance, the DOJ would only need to provide one review. CBJ would not be required to conduct an election by mail, it would only be an option if adopted and approved.

Ordinance 2007-02 was introduced on January 8, 2007. Following introduction, I ran a special notice of public hearing regarding the proposed election code change in 6 editions of the Juneau Empire. I sent out over 70 letters of explanation, with a copy of the ordinance, to neighborhood associations, minority group representatives (per DOJ), to long time election workers and interested groups such as the League of Women voters. A public hearing was held January 29, at which time the Assembly reviewed the three written comments received from the public. The Assembly at that time referred the matter to the committee of the whole.

I hope that I have answered most of your in the “Frequently Asked Questions” Sheet included in the packet.

You will notice on Page 6 of the FAQ sheet, I have provided more information on the anticipated costs of a by-mail election. I worked with our ballot printer in Homer, Alaska, who has handled by-mail elections for the State of Alaska and for Fairbanks, and he provided me with cost estimates. You will notice that the costs are higher than I anticipated, and I hope that will not be a “deal breaker” on this issue, as costs can vary, technology can improve over time, and we may be able to reduce these costs with closer examination. If I don’t have the budget to do a by-mail election, I won’t be doing one, but I would like the option to provide this service to the voters in code, if not in budget.