



Agency Recommendation Summary

The Office of the Secretary of State (OSOS) requests \$494,000 in one-time funding to pilot automated signature verification technology for mail-in ballots. This pilot addresses issues highlighted in the 2022 SAO Performance Audit focused on ballot rejection rates. By improving the accuracy, efficiency, and consistency of signature verification, this initiative aims to enhance election integrity, reduce disparities, and maintain public confidence as mail-in voting volumes grow.

Fiscal Summary

Fiscal Summary <i>Dollars in Thousands</i>	Fiscal Years		Biennial	Fiscal Years		Biennial
	2026	2027	2025-27	2028	2029	2027-29
Operating Expenditures						
Fund 001 - 1	\$247	\$247	\$494	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total Expenditures	\$247	\$247	\$494	\$0	\$0	\$0

Decision Package Description

Background

Signature verification is a key step in Washington State's mail-in voting process, ensuring voter identity is confirmed before a vote is counted. The [2022 SAO Performance Audit evaluating Washington's Ballot Rejection Rates](#) revealed large disparities in rejection rates across counties, with some counties rejecting ballots four to seven times more often due to inconsistent interpretation of signature verification standards. These discrepancies can erode public trust, especially when certain groups, like younger, male, and minority voters, experience higher rejection rates. While every valid vote should be counted, many voters are less likely to respond to signature mismatch notices. This highlights the need for more efficient, standardized signature verification methods.

Problem Statement

The current manual signature verification process for mail-in ballots is becoming increasingly inefficient as the volume of mail-in ballots rises. This inefficiency slows down the election process and increases the risk of inconsistent verification, leading to delays in reporting results and eroding public confidence in the electoral system. The 2022 SAO audit found that the subjective nature of manual signature verification contributes to disparities in rejection rates across counties and demographic groups. With the growing demand for mail-in voting, a more efficient and standardized solution is needed to ensure the integrity and fairness of the election process.

Solution Statement

To address the inefficiencies in manual signature verification for mail-in ballots, the Office of the Secretary of State proposes a pilot program using advanced technology for automated or assisted verification. The pilot will allow automated acceptance of signatures with high confidence, while signatures with lower confidence will be flagged for human verification. This approach will enable election administrators to focus their efforts on the more complex, lower-confidence cases.

The \$494,000 in funding will be used to contract experts, purchase software, cover computing costs, and provide grants to all 39 counties for implementation.

Authorized by RCW 29A.40.110, this solution will improve the accuracy, speed, and consistency of signature verification statewide and address disparities in rejection rates, as highlighted by the 2022 SAO Audit. The pilot will undergo rigorous testing to ensure reliability and adherence to standardized criteria. This initiative is essential for maintaining election integrity, building public trust, and supporting the increasing use of mail-in voting in Washington.

Alternatives Explored

The primary alternative to this proposal is continuing with the existing manual signature verification process, which risks increased delays and

potential inaccuracies as mail-in ballot volumes grow. Another option considered was implementing automated signature verification through specialized mail processing equipment. However, this equipment is costly, large, and not feasible for all counties due to space and budget constraints. Additionally, maintaining the status quo would not address the inefficiencies and potential biases inherent in the current manual system. Given these limitations, the proposed pilot program with contracted technology development is the most practical and scalable solution.

Existing Resources

Currently, there are no existing resources dedicated to the development or implementation of automated signature verification technology. This pilot program requires new funding as the necessary expertise, software, and infrastructure are not available within the existing budget or resources of the Office of the Secretary of State.

Assumptions and Calculations

Expansion, Reduction, Elimination or Alteration of a current program or service:

Not Applicable

Detailed Assumptions and Calculations:

See Attachment

Workforce Assumptions:

Not Applicable

Historical Funding:

Not Applicable

Strategic and Performance Outcomes

Strategic Framework:

This decision package aligns with key strategic goals for the OSOS, the Governor's Results Washington, and WaTech.

It supports OSOS Objective 4 by enhancing the ability to deliver excellent service to all Washingtonians through automated signature verification, which improves the accuracy and efficiency of elections. This helps build public trust and engagement in democratic processes.

The proposal aligns with Governor Goal 5 for an Efficient, Effective, and Accountable Government by streamlining election processes, reducing manual work, and improving service to voters. This demonstrates the Governor's focus on making government more accountable and effective.

Additionally, it supports WaTech Goal 3 by using innovative technology to address election process inefficiencies, and WaTech Goal 1 by ensuring all communities have equal access to accurate and timely election results, creating a more inclusive government experience.

Performance Outcomes:

The success of this pilot program will be evaluated based on specific performance metrics, including:

- Measuring the reduction in time required to verify signatures compared to the current manual process.
- Comparing error rates between the automated system and traditional manual methods to ensure improvements in accuracy.
- Quantifying the reduction in labor required for signature verification, allowing election officials to focus on other critical tasks.

Equity Impacts

Community Outreach and Engagement:

Not Applicable

Disproportional Impact Considerations:

Not Applicable

Target Communities and Populations:

This proposal advances equity by addressing disparities identified in the 2022 SAO Performance Audit. By reducing the potential for human error and bias in the signature verification process, the automated system will particularly benefit voters with disabilities, the elderly, and those from marginalized communities. It improves accuracy and consistency, ensuring that all voters' ballots are fairly counted and supports a more inclusive and equitable electoral system in Washington State.

Community Inputs and Incorporation:

Not Applicable

Other Collateral Connections

HEAL Act Agencies Supplemental Questions

Not Applicable

Puget Sound Recovery:

Not Applicable

State Workforce Impacts:

Not Applicable

Intergovernmental:

Not Applicable

Stakeholder Impacts:

Not Applicable

State Facilities Impacts:

Not Applicable

Changes from Current Law:

Not Applicable

Legal or Administrative Mandates:

This proposal is in direct response to the findings of the 2022 SAO Performance Audit, which identified significant disparities in ballot rejection rates across counties in Washington State. The audit highlighted concerns about the inconsistent interpretation of signature verification standards, particularly affecting younger voters, minority groups, and voters with disabilities. While there is no specific litigation or executive order mandating this action, the audit's findings underscore the need for more uniform and efficient methods to ensure equitable access to the voting process. This pilot program aims to address these disparities by implementing an automated signature verification system, reducing the subjectivity and potential bias inherent in manual verification. This initiative will help ensure compliance with the state's commitment to fair and consistent electoral practices.

Governor's Salmon Strategy:

Not Applicable

Reference Documents

[PA_Evaluating_WA_Ballot_Rejections_ar-1029711.pdf](#)

[SC-PL-Streamline Signature Verification-CostModel_FINAL.xlsm](#)

[SC-PL-Streamline Signature Verification-ITA WaTech Submission.pdf](#)

[SC-PL-Streamline Signature Verification-ITABudget_FINAL.xlsx](#)

IT Addendum

Does this Decision Package include funding for any IT-related costs, including hardware, software, (including cloud-based services), contracts or IT staff?

Yes

Objects of Expenditure

Objects of Expenditure <i>Dollars in Thousands</i>	Fiscal Years		Biennial	Fiscal Years		Biennial
	2026	2027	2025-27	2028	2029	2027-29
Obj. C	\$215	\$215	\$430	\$0	\$0	\$0
Obj. T	\$32	\$32	\$64	\$0	\$0	\$0

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