



CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION MEETING

AGENDA SECTION	WORK SESSION
MEETING DATE	JUNE 1, 2026

ITEM:	Transition to City Administered 18-Day Early Voting and Delegation of 46-Day Absentee Voting Operations to Anoka County. (5 Minutes)	
<i>Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager</i>		
DEPARTMENT: Administration	BY/DATE: Sara Ion / May 26, 2026	
CORE CITY STRATEGIES: <i>(please indicate areas that apply by adding an "X" in front of the selected text below)</i>		
_Community that Grows with Purpose and Equity	X Engaged, Effective and Forward-Thinking	
_High Quality Public Spaces	_Resilient and Prosperous Economy	
X Safe, Accessible and Built for Everyone	X Inclusive and Connected Community	

BACKGROUND

The City of Columbia Heights has administered Minnesota’s traditional 46-day absentee voting process requiring City staff to operate an extended absentee voting program involving administering an envelope based absentee voting process that is identical to mail ballots.

During the 2026 legislative session, the Minnesota Legislature adopted HF 4240 / SF 4006, which was signed into law by Governor Tim Walz on May 18, 2026. The legislation modernized election administration procedures and clarified that municipalities may choose to focus local operations on the 18-day early voting period while allowing counties to continue administering the broader 46-day absentee voting process. Below is an overview of the two voting processes.

Absentee Voting in Person (Traditional 46-Day Process)

This is the older system Minnesota has used for many years.

How it works:

- A voter comes to City Hall or Anoka County Election Office.
- The voter fills out an application to receive an absentee ballot.
- The voter marks their ballot.
- The ballot is placed into a privacy envelope and then into a second envelope containing voter information.
- The voter seals the envelope and places the personal identifier information and signature on the outer second envelope.
- City Staff reviews the outer envelope for completeness and places their signature on the envelope as a witness, most often also affixing their notary stamp.
- Election staff (two or more) later review, accept and process the ballot before it can be sent to Anoka County for processing by the assembled ballot board.

Important details:

- Voting begins **46 days before Election Day.**

- Ballots are treated like mail ballots, even when the voter is physically present.
- Staff must:
 - verify signatures,
 - process envelopes,
 - store ballots securely,
 - and review ballots through an absentee ballot board.

What the voter experiences:

The voter casts a ballot, but it is **not immediately fed into the voting machine.**

Early Voting (18-Day Process)

This is the newer system authorized under Minnesota law.

How it works:

- A voter comes to City Hall or Anoka County Election Office.
- The voter completes a check in procedure similar to what occurs on Election Day.
- The voter marks the ballot.
- The ballot is fed directly into the tabulator (voting machine) immediately.

Important details:

- Voting begins **18 days before Election Day.**
- No absentee envelopes or ballot-board processing are required.
- The process functions much more like Election Day voting.

What the voter experiences:

The voter gets immediate confirmation that the ballot was accepted by the voting machine.

Most importantly the transition to offering Early Voting closely aligns with the demonstrated voting preferences of Columbia Heights residents. Election data from the 2024 General Election shows that Columbia Heights voters overwhelmingly preferred voting in person during the final 18 days before Election Day at City Hall, rather than utilizing the traditional envelope based absentee voting process.

Between October 18, 2024, and November 4, 2024 (the 18 day early voting period that was implemented in 2024), approximately 2,000 voters — nearly one-fifth of all eligible voters in Columbia Heights — cast ballots early at City Hall by feeding their ballots directly into voting equipment. This level of participation demonstrates strong community preference for the convenience, immediacy, and familiarity of early in person voting.

Additionally, voter demand remained exceptionally high through the final days of the early voting period. On November 4, 2024 — just one day before Election Day — 414 voters cast ballots early at City Hall alone. These participation trends indicate that Columbia Heights voters strongly value:

- accessible in-person early voting opportunities,
- direct ballot tabulation,
- voting at City Hall in close proximity to Election Day.

SUMMARY OF CURRENT STATUS

Under the updated law and proposed implementation in Columbia Heights, voters will continue to retain full access to absentee voting beginning 46 days before the election through county-administered services, while the City Clerk will focus local operations on the final 18 days of early voting, when ballots are cast directly into voting tabulators in close alignment with Election Day operations.

For Columbia Heights, this approach presents an opportunity to improve efficiency, create clarity in the early voting process, better utilize Anoka County's established absentee voting infrastructure, and contain increasing election administration costs — all while preserving voter access and convenience. These considerations will continue to become increasingly important as state election law imposes greater cybersecurity, technology, and training requirements on election administrators

The proposed implementation changes which governmental entity administers portions of the voting process; it **does not** reduce voter eligibility or access opportunities. Residents will continue to have access to:

- absentee voting by mail,
- in-person envelope based absentee voting through Anoka County,
- military and overseas voting options,
- local in-person early voting at Columbia Heights City Hall during the 18-day early voting period.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommend transitioning to the 18-day model early voting model. This will align the City with the Legislature's intent to provide municipalities with greater operational flexibility and will also allow for consistent communication to residents about early voting (directly casting a ballot) being available at City Hall and absentee voting (envelope process) being available via Anoka County.

With council confirmation, staff will begin working on resident outreach via the city website, city newsletter and city social media platforms related to the location and availability of voting access opportunities. This will be a great opportunity to clarify the different voting options available to residents and how to access them. Communication will focus on voter experience rather than administrative terminology as many residents do not distinguish between the Absentee Ballot process and Early Voting.

Requested Council Action/ Discussion Topics / Key Questions
Staff request that the council review the implementation of the 18-day early voting period so that the attached draft notice can be submitted to Anoka County Elections to begin at the upcoming August State Primary Election.

ATTACHMENT(S)

Draft Notice to Anoka County Elections