

To: Members of the Elections Commission

From: Department of Elections Division Managers

Date: Monday, November 14, 2022

Re: Elections Commission Meeting, Wednesday, November 16, 2022
Agenda Item # 9. Possible Closed Session Regarding Public Employee
Appointment/Hiring: Director of Elections

Dear Elections Commission Members:

We, as division managers of the San Francisco Department of Elections, submit this letter in support of the Elections Commission reappointing the current Director of the Department of Elections, John Arntz, to serve another five-year term.

In this letter, we provide a brief overview of some of the challenges this Department has successfully overcome since Director Arntz was first appointed in April of 2002 as well as highlight the Department's ongoing success under Director Arntz's leadership.

The City faced a number of serious problems with administering elections before Director Arntz's tenure. This Department saw five different Directors in as many years, the Department's budget was in the red by millions of dollars, San Francisco's elections infrastructure was in disarray, the public lacked confidence in Department operations due to various election irregularities, and the Department's mission and standards were not clear.

The appointment of Director Arntz in April of 2002 brought order to this Department. Director Arntz effected immediate change as he worked with division managers to develop standardized procedures as well as staffing and expenditure plans. Under Director Arntz's leadership, the Department streamlined all of its operations and stabilized its budget in the few months leading up to the November 2002 election. Consequently, Director Arntz's early successes were promptly acknowledged by the Elections Commission in its 2002-2003 Annual Report:

"Notwithstanding its chronic lack of funding, the Department has grown and prospered under John Arntz. In spite of much adversity, Mr. Arntz and his dedicated staff have acted professionally, exemplifying industry and creativity. May the Department in years succeeding maintain the high level of achievement that the Department has now achieved."

The Elections Commission's sentiments were echoed in 2004 by the Board of Supervisors in its resolution commending Director Arntz and the Department for their outstanding accomplishments:

“WHEREAS, the San Francisco Department of Elections has had an unfortunate history of election-related irregularities which, over a period of years, undermined public confidence in the integrity and accuracy of our municipal elections; and

WHEREAS, under the capable leadership of the current Director, John Arntz, the Department of Elections has become an efficient, professional department, operating at the highest possible standards; and...

...WHEREAS, the Department of Elections has set a new standard of excellence that has helped to restore public confidence in our municipal elections; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That John Arntz and the Department of Elections are commended for their outstanding accomplishments.”

From these beginnings, we’ve never looked back. Under the steadfast and sound leadership of Director Arntz, the Department successfully conducted over thirty public elections and forty agency and district elections, implemented countless new election laws, adopted several new voting systems, created a proven record of fiscal responsibility, and continued to make election programs and services ever-more accessible and convenient for San Francisco voters.

These accomplishments were recognized by the Civil Grand Jury in its 2017-2018 report:

“We gained insight into how the Department of Elections operates through interviews and reams of internal documents. We approached each concern with a deeply skeptical eye, keen on making sure that the DoE was faithfully serving the interests of San Francisco citizens. This report omits these topics because the Department of Elections is doing a fabulous job. The problems that they face are challenging, and demand versatility and fluency in technological, logistical and interpersonal skills. Our inquiries into almost every element of their operations around elections administration consistently illuminated a department functioning effectively to fulfill the need of its citizens.”¹

As Department division managers, all of us have worked directly with Director Arntz to implement policies and procedures that meet – and often exceed – compliance with election law, and we have all witnessed firsthand the efforts that Director Arntz has put forth to ensure election transparency and integrity. We continue to work together as a cohesive team to ensure our voter rolls are accurate; our testing of voting equipment, ballot processing operations, and post-election canvass audit are fully open to public observation; our network

¹ Civil Grand Jury | 2017-2018 Open Source Voting in San Francisco, Appendix M: Unstated Excellence, page 46

and cybersecurity protocols are guided by best practices; and our physical security and chain-of-custody procedures are followed consistently throughout each election cycle.

Conducting a free, fair, and functional election is a complex process, one that requires expertise in election laws and regulations, operational and budgetary experience as it relates to the conduct of elections, the organizing of hundreds of employees and thousands of poll workers, the planning and delivery of programs and services aimed to enfranchise every eligible voter, and dedication to provide exemplary public service. Director Arntz has shown these skills time and time again.

Under Director Arntz, our Department has remained laser-focused on meeting the needs of San Francisco voters. More specifically, Director Arntz lead this Department to develop and provide a myriad of programs designed to serve the general public and city's most vulnerable residents – including those who do not speak English, those with disabilities, those involved with the justice system, and those experiencing homelessness. Year after year, our voter outreach programs, as well as our registration and voting services, continue to be recognized and acknowledged by members of the public in comments such as the following:

“You all do amazing work. Definitely the best run department in the entire city!” – Voter Feedback

“Continue what you are doing! Thanks for serving our community and protecting our right to vote!” – Voter Feedback

“Thank you for making voting easy and convenient. I have voted in cities in two other states, as well as the District of Columbia, and nowhere was it as easy to participate in the democratic process as in San Francisco. The ballot tracking was also amazing, and based upon the comments on our Cole Valley neighborhood facebook group (which has more than 7000 people), many, many people used the tracking and were excited when their votes were counted. Thank you!!!” – Voter Feedback

“I think the SF Department of Elections does amazing work! The images of endless lines in other places I see on TV are completely foreign to me. I have NEVER had to wait or struggle to vote.” – Voter Feedback

“SF runs the best and tightest election process!” – Poll Worker Feedback

“They (observers) were asked to observe voting locations for compliance with language access laws (under both Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act and Section 14201 of the California Elections Code), accessibility, and overall voting conditions. Overall, our volunteers found that election officials and poll workers in San Francisco served voters admirably and effectively.” – Asian Americans Advancing Justice, June 2022 Poll Observation Report

“Staff at the Department of Elections do an incredible job! Voting in four elections this year seemed a bit overwhelming at first, but the Department made it incredibly easy. I can breathe a sigh of relief knowing that our elections are in such competent hands. Keep doing what you’re doing, John Arntz and team!” – Voter Feedback

“I saw this thread on reddit:

https://www.reddit.com/r/sanfrancisco/comments/yp7mf/i_love_voting_in_sf/

and it rang really true to me. I moved here from Texas 10 years ago, and the thing is... when you do everything right no one tells you how great of a job you're doing.

You guys do a fantastic job, and I hope you know how much of a difference you make.” – Voter Feedback

The arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020 constituted a considerable test of Director Arntz’s leadership. The first set of logistical challenges appeared on March 16, 2020, when Mayor London N. Breed issued a stay at home order to protect public health in San Francisco, as the Department was in the midst of completing a myriad of time-sensitive tasks associated with certifying the March 3, 2020 Presidential Primary Election. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic put the entire city into a state of uncertainty, under the leadership of Director Arntz, the Department continued to operate under the highest standards and, on March 31, 2020, Director Arntz certified the results of the March 3, 2020 Election. However, with the November 3, 2020 Presidential Election only a few months away, the Department was immediately faced with a second set of COVID-19 related logistical challenges.

In the context of complying with complex and rapidly changing health rules, laws, and emergency orders, Director Arntz immediately effectuated planning and preparation for the November 3, 2020 Presidential Election. His extraordinary diligence, in tandem with his dedication to finding practical solutions through collaboration with division managers and city leaders, is what kept our city’s election operations functioning and made the November 3, 2020 Election a success.

The temporary outdoor voting center in front of Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, with 75 ballot-issuing stations and 200 voting booths, all set up in compliance with health rules, offers a prime example of Director Arntz’s effective problem-solving during this time. This carefully-engineered voting space, organized in only a few months, provided a full array of election services for the November 3, 2020 Presidential Election and was open for the entire 29-day early voting period.

During this period, Department staff also worked under Director Arntz’s guidance to implement health and safety protocols at all polling places and Department work sites, including its warehouse and City Hall facilities; to deliver ballots to voters experiencing COVID-19 related illness or quarantine; to transition from in-person poll worker training classes to online training; to conduct extensive voter outreach about the many measures

the Department had adopted to ensure safe voting options for all San Francisco voters; and to process an unprecedented number of returned vote-by-mail ballots during the City's first "all-mail" election.

On December 1, 2020, Director Arntz certified the results of the November 3, 2020 Presidential Election. Final turnout was 86.33%, representing 449,866 ballots cast by San Francisco's 521,099 registered voters. This meant that more San Franciscans were registered for this election, and more had cast their ballots, than at any time in the city's history. In recognition of these successes, the Elections Commission commended Director Arntz in a December 2020 letter to Mayor London N. Breed:

"During such a challenging year, the Department and Director of Elections performed exceptionally in conducting free, secure, and fair elections. The Commission wants to commend Director Arntz for his incredible leadership, as well as all staff, including voting center staff and poll workers. We could not have done this without them. The Department quickly responded to requests for additional ballot drop-off sites and remained nimble and responsive to every voter."

"As a Commission, we are proud to show the public how a city agency can operate efficiently and effectively by having a strong partnership with the Department. We hope the City will continue to work with us to have San Francisco lead the way in running accessible and fair elections to all voters."

Under Director Arntz's leadership, the Department has administered over 30 elections, each of which was carefully planned and successfully conducted. For every election, Director Arntz submits an Election Plan detailing the policies and procedures to be used in that election and highlighting new practices and enhancements to existing programs and processes in effect.

In October 2021, the Elections Commission agreed that the Department's formal election planning process had contributed in a significant way to the transparency and fairness of San Francisco elections when it issued a resolution. In this resolution, the Elections Commission urged the city to encourage members of the U.S. Congress to enact federal legislation requiring all election agencies in the country to submit similar plans. In the cover letter sent with the October 2021 resolution, the Elections Commission again commended Director Arntz:

"As you may know, before any election, the Department of Elections submits an election plan for the Elections Commission to approve. The Commission and the Department work hand-in-hand to understand the details of the election to ensure a proper, safe, and fair election for all voters. As you may have witnessed, San Francisco runs one of the best elections in the country and we believe this transparent process has allowed us to continue to improve our elections."

We are seeking your support and leadership to work with your staff and our federal delegation to pursue a legislation to improve our elections across the country. We strongly believe San Francisco can lead the way on how preserve and uphold our voting rights across the country.”

In the last year, the Department conducted an unprecedented number of elections – the September 14, 2021 California Gubernatorial Recall Election, the February 15, 2022 Consolidated Special Municipal Election, the April 19, 2022 Special General Election, the June 7, 2022 Consolidated Statewide Direct Primary Election, and the November 8, 2022 Consolidated General Election – often performing tasks for two or more elections at the same time due to overlapping statutory and operational deadlines. Despite truncated timelines, COVID-19 imposed staffing challenges, many changes to election law, and evolving public health mandates, the Department fulfilled its obligations to San Francisco voters – each of these elections was administered successfully in a safe and fiscally prudent manner.

We, as division managers, take pride in the Department’s many accomplishments under the leadership of Director Arntz and are honored to have been recognized numerous times in recent years as a model for efficient, inclusive, and transparent elections. Going forward, we know that under the experienced and proven leadership of Director Arntz, we will continue to provide San Francisco voters with excellent service while adapting to legislative and technological changes and to fulfil the Department’s mission of providing equitable access to voting and election-related services and conducting free, fair, and functional elections for the City and County of San Francisco for many years to come.

For the reasons stated in this letter, we, the undersigned, wholeheartedly support the reappointment of John Arntz as the Director of the Department of Elections for another five-year term.

Sincerely,

Andy Pastalaniec
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