

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB 655 Local Government – County Commissioner Elections – District Voting

POSITION: Support

Date: February 5, 2021

Dear Committee,

I live in Commissioner District 1 in St. Mary’s County. I am writing in support of HB 655.

The 2020 General Election President race results shown below indicate the party divisions within the county:

	% Republican	% Democrat
Saint Mary’s County	57	43
Commissioner District 1	51	49
Commissioner District 2	62	38
Commissioner District 3	70	30
Commissioner District 4	47	53

Without the opportunity to elect a representative within each district, the local governing body, the Commissioners of St. Mary’s County, will not experience the benefits of political diversity, such as healthy debate and differing perspectives. Without the opportunity to elect a representative within each district, our local governing body will continue to be a Republican caucus, rather than a representative governing board. Without the opportunity to elect a representative within each district, my vote cannot carry its proportional weight within one district; rather it shrinks under the aggregate weight of the entire county; 12,500 voters versus 54,000 voters. This is not the spirit of democracy. For comparison sake, consider the outcome if all Maryland registered voters could vote in each of the eight Congressional Representative races. While somewhat extreme, this example is fitting in that the single Republican majority district can and did elect a representative who reflects that constituency. The same should be the case for St. Mary’s County Commissioner districts.

During a discussion of HB 655 at the Commissioners of St. Mary’s County meeting on January 26, 2021, one commissioner asked the questions, “Has Delegate Crosby identified any irregularities or things that need to be corrected by this bill? Is there somebody not being represented? Somebody being disadvantaged? Somebody being disenfranchised?”

With respect to those questions and in my opinion, voters, particularly Democrats, and particularly those in the southern half of the county, and most particularly those who do not have a driver’s license, or a car, or fare for the bus, are being inconvenienced at the least, and disenfranchised at the most. Please consider:

- September 2020: The Commissioners of St. Mary’s County declined the opportunity to establish a second Early Voting Center for the county. When the Maryland State Board of Elections indicated support for a second Early Voting Center in the southern portion of the county, specifically because “there’s a fair population and public transportation is not that great,” the SBOE Chair postponed the decision on the county’s voting plan and asked the County Commissioners, through the SBOE Administrator, for their position on a second Early Voting Center. This was an opportunity to increase voter access for all voters in the county, particularly

those in Districts 1 and 4. The Commissioners, through the County Administrator, responded with “no position and deferred to the local BOE.” St. Mary’s County entered the 2020 Presidential election with a single Early Voting Center. Over eight days, 20,357 people voted early; each day ranged between a minimum of 2222 voters on the first day to a maximum of 2731 voters on the fifth day. My wait in line to enter the center was about one hour. (Reference State Board of Elections Meetings of September 4 and September 11; Early Voting Stats: [https://elections.maryland.gov/press\\_room/2020\\_stats/EarlyVoting%20by%20County%20-%20PG20.pdf](https://elections.maryland.gov/press_room/2020_stats/EarlyVoting%20by%20County%20-%20PG20.pdf))

- January 2021: HB 656 was briefed to the County Commissioners; the legislation requires that an Early Voting Center be located not more than 500 feet from a public transportation station or stop. The briefer noted a past practice during early voting: that it was possible for people to call the dispatcher and ask that the bus divert into the fire department (the Early Voting Center location). He further stated that if the legislation requires a stop, “we’ll put a stop in.” The decision was made to take no position on the bill. (Reference: Commissioners of St. Mary’s County meeting January 26, 2021)

As stated previously, these events highlight the need for political diversity on the local governing body; specifically, the need for a Commissioner who places the interests of his/her district constituents, in this case, increased voter access, above the interests of the majority party. The rightful path to this outcome is for voters within each district to elect their respective District Commissioner, such that the elected individual represents district constituents as decided by the voting process, and the Commissioner is held accountable to the district voters who elected him/her.

I urge favorable report on HB 655.

Respectfully submitted,

Miriam Klapka  
44620 Shallow Ford Ct.  
Tall Timbers, MD 20690