

Madam Chair, Mr. Vice Chair, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, I am writing to submit testimony as a concerned resident of St. Mary's County, MD on behalf of **Maryland House Bill 0655**. I am very much **in favor** of this bill which would make it so that county commissioners in the state of Maryland would be elected by a plurality of the vote in their own districts, rather than at-large.

I have witnessed firsthand how members of the Board of Commissioners make decisions to appease the majority interests of the larger county rather than to represent their actual district constituencies. Nowhere is this more apparent in our county than in Lexington Park. Despite grassroots community efforts to address major social issues like homelessness or garner support for a community center to serve underserved youth and adult populations, the Commissioner who is supposed to represent Lexington Park's interests instead often advocates against such proposals. When justifying refusal to vote for funds requested for a homeless shelter in May 2017 for his own district, Commissioner Todd Morgan claimed that doing so would attract more homeless people to the area (Babcock, 2017). This claim was made without evidence, and in direct opposition to the community aid being requested. Likewise, there has been an ongoing effort to pursue funding and support for a community center (and now a YMCA) in the Lexington Park area, but despite a huge grass roots effort including a youth advisory board and numerous studies, Commissioner Morgan's support has been sorely lacking for the effort. Indeed, at one 2019 public forum on the issue, the local paper reported:

"Advocates for the center's Lexington Park location were also alarmed by recent comments from Commissioner Todd Morgan (R), whose district includes Lexington Park, regarding the group's shifting "list of wants" for the center, and the amenities that are included in Lexington Park already — outdoor parks, Southern Maryland Job Source, a new for-profit indoor gymnasium being built on Willows Road, and the Lexington Park library. But advocates contend that Job Source is difficult to work with, outdoor fields are crowded already, and Lexington Park youth are at risk in an underserved community. In that area, 13.7 percent of households are below the poverty rate, according to a survey covering 2013 to 2017 from the U.S. Census Bureau's small-area income and poverty estimates, compared to 8.5 percent in the county overall, 9.3 percent in Maryland and 13.4 percent in the United States." (Deville, 2019).

These are examples of one Commissioner who is failing to represent his own district's needs, but this is a bigger issue than just one district or even one county. A purely at large approach to voting for local government is a clear violation of the Voting Rights Act Section 2, and the Legislature has an excellent opportunity to end this undemocratic practice with this bill. If this matter ever were to be brought to court, Maryland would likely lose. According to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, at large voting is often found to be discriminatory, especially when minority communities' votes are overwhelmed by majority white voters in the larger area, which I believe is the case in Lexington Park. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund has successfully challenged in court similar at large voting schemes like St. Mary's County in Alabama and Georgia, and I believe they should prevail here as well.

Our county Board of Commissioners would be more diverse demographically and politically if this bill were to pass, and our Commissioners themselves know it. I believe their opposition to the bill is that the St. Mary's County Republican party would lose one or two seats. Our board could benefit greatly from having greater diversity in points of view, backgrounds, and yes, political ideology. The reality is also that just as Democrats may gain seats in St. Mary's if the bill passes, other counties impacted by the bill with Democratic majorities on their Boards of

Commissioners may lose some Democratic seats as a result. Despite being a lifelong Democrat, I believe that is a price we should all be willing to pay, to right the longstanding wrong of denying the citizens of Lexington Park and other communities in Maryland the opportunity to elect their own representation instead of having the larger county decide for them. The Assembly should pass this bill because it's the right thing to do, even if it means the majority party statewide loses some seats in local elections.

Thank you for considering my testimony and I ask you for a **favorable report** on this vitally important legislation.

1. "Morgan wants to avoid making Lexington Park into a homeless magnet" by Jason Babcock, The Enterprise, May 10, 2017
2. "Residents press commissioners on Lexington Park community center," by Taylor Deville Jan 11, 2019
3. "At-Large Voting Frequently Asked Questions" NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/At-Large-Voting-Frequently-Asked-Questions-2.pdf>

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