

***St. Mary's County Branch #7025***

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Testimony – HB0655
February 9, 2021

The St. Mary's County Branch #7025 and the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP strongly encourage a favorable committee vote on HB0655. This bill is about improving democracy at the local level. For decades, several districts in Maryland have operated under an at-large voting system for county commissioner election. Although the county commissioners are required to reside in the district they represent, the current system allows citizens, county-wide, to vote for all county commissioner candidates, county-wide, regardless of district. We believe that the citizens of each county commissioner district have the right to select who represents their interests without influence from voters outside of their district. This dilution of voting power is anti-democratic and runs counter to the spirit of the Voting Right Act. The current system silences the individual voices of voters in specific districts, replacing their voices with those of the majority of the county. It is undemocratic, as it potentially leaves voters with local representation elected by others. In the coming week, the Maryland General Assembly has the opportunity to make a change before the Justice Department gets involved.

Delegate Brian Crosby (MD 29B) has filed a bill in the Maryland General Assembly that seeks to rectify this injustice happening in St. Mary's County and other counties around the state. It requires that candidates for Boards of County Commissioners win a plurality of the votes in the district they hope to represent. Every State and Federally Elected Official in Maryland has to win in the district in which they are running. The People residing in the rural counties in Maryland deserve the right to have that same rule apply to their county elections.

In St. Mary's County, Maryland, specifically, this results in the disenfranchisement of a large number of our minority voters. Votes from the rest of the county dilute the votes from their community. It is unacceptable. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits voting practices or procedures that result in discrimination or the abridgement of the right of any citizen to vote. Most challenges that fall under this section involve at-large voting schemes (United States of America v. Town of Lake Park, Florida and Commissioners Patricia Plasket-Osterman, Jeff Carey, Ed Daly, and Kendall Rumsey, in their official capacity as members of the Lake Park Town Commission, and DESCAR DUBOIS, in her official capacity as Mayor of Lake Park, 2009). This at-large voting essentially silences the votes of the largest community of minorities in St. Mary's County, Maryland and mirrors systems that have been changed because they violate the Voting Rights Act. MD House Bill 655 would fix that.

This unjust system is in place in Calvert, Charles, Garrett, Queen Anne's, and in our own county, St. Mary's. We stand in solidarity with the NAACP branches of those jurisdictions and with the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP, and we are calling for reform. Those who champion democracy and civil rights must do everything they can to strengthen it. This bill is one way the Maryland General Assembly can strengthen democracy in our state.

The bill is scheduled for a hearing on February 9, 2021 at 1:30 pm in the House Ways and Means Committee. Let the Ways and Means Committee and the Maryland General Assembly know that voting rights violations are unacceptable in our great state.

For these reasons, The St. Mary's County Branch, Unit #7025 and The Maryland State Conference urge the committee to issue a favorable report for House Bill 0655.

We deserve the right to select the people that represent us at all levels, help make that a reality for us.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. R. Hall III', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

William R. Hall III, President
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