

**HB0655**  
**FAVORABLE**

Madam Chair, Mr. Vice Chair, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

I am testifying today from a difficult place. I am a member of the St. Mary's County Democratic Central Committee and we have been fighting an uphill battle.

St. Mary's County has only one Democrat representing us in any elected office at the state or county level. Although registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by only about 4,000 voters, Republicans have been very successful in recent elections. And that's ok -- it's the will of the people based on the current voting system. But now that Republicans are in power across the board, they do not want to lose it. I believe that is why they are opposed to this bill. Our five white, Republican Commissioners know that if we allow voting by Commissioner district they may lose a seat or two at the Commissioner table and they don't like that possibility.

Nevermind that voting by district is the most democratic and equitable way to elect County Commissioners. Nevermind that's how it's done at the state and federal levels. Nevermind that this bill may actually make it easier for those Republican Commissioners to campaign in and represent the constituents in their own districts.

It seems that Republicans in St. Mary's County don't want to give Democrats a fair shot. Some oppose greater access to voting and opening a second early voting site in the more diverse and Democratic area of Lexington Park. Others oppose mail-in voting. They recently removed several prominent Democrats from County volunteer boards and commissions. And when citizens requested that the County Redistricting Board be fairly composed of two Republicans, two Democrats, and one Unaffiliated voter, one Commissioner stated he was against equal political representation and another suggested we instead focus our efforts on gerrymandering at the state and federal level.

To be clear, I oppose gerrymandering at any level, but I am focused on the potential for gerrymandering in my own County. This Redistricting Board will draw County Commissioner and Board of Education district lines that will be in effect for 10 years, and some of our Commissioners don't want Democrats involved. On Feb. 2, the Commissioners voted to delay appointments to the County Redistricting Board. Although they had already advertised and sought applicants for the Board, and expressed concerns about the rushed timeline to get redistricting done before the end of the year, they chose to delay appointments until after they receive Census data.

Tellingly, at the meeting, one Commissioner stated another reason for the delay: "[W]e have to figure out what happens in the legislature this year, in case there's any impacts on voting districts and the way people vote." Why should this bill affect the composition of the Redistricting

Board? It sounds like our Commissioners are playing politics with what should be a bi-partisan process.

With regard to the bill at hand, our County Commissioners laughed when it was discussed at their Jan. 26 meeting. They incredulously asked why this bill is necessary, and opined that minorities don't need help in getting elected. One Commissioner stated: "I think if you want to succeed, you can." At their Feb. 2 meeting, another questioned why the current voting system that's "tried and true" has to be changed and said Del. Crosby should put it to a referendum on the 2022 ballot instead. Clearly, our Commissioners don't understand systemic racism and disenfranchisement.

Last year, in St. Mary's County Commissioner District 4, Joe Biden won more votes than Donald Trump. In Commissioner District 1, he very nearly won. The results show that those districts may not be receiving the representation they deserve at the County Commissioner level. HB 0655 would fix that.

I am asking for a favorable report on this bill.

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