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Committee: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Testimony on: HB 1047 – Mail-In Voting Enhancement Act
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: April 1, 2021

The Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on HB 1047. The bill will put into law some of the things that were done in 2020 by emergency executive order and also improvements that will make the mail-in ballot process more accessible and transparent in the future.

The Sierra Club and its members care about both the natural and human environments, including ending racial and social injustice. As a grassroots organization, the Sierra Club supports efforts to make voting as accessible and convenient as possible for all eligible voters, regardless of whether they choose to vote in person at Early Voting Centers or on election day or by mail.

One innovation that was immensely popular with voters during the 2020 elections was availability of secure drop boxes for return of voted ballots to local boards of elections. Many voters chose to use the drop boxes for convenience or to avoid uncertainty about whether or when their ballot might be returned via mail. The drop boxes were not deployed all at once in 2020 because of the time it took to receive them from manufacturers. Now that the state has acquired the drop boxes, it makes sense to add their use and equitable allocation among the counties into law.

A rudimentary ballot tracking system did exist for the 2020 elections, but it left many voters bewildered because it did not provide the kind of timely, detailed information that individuals are used to receiving after almost every online purchase. At least two ballot tracking systems exist that provide the features of commercial tracking systems and were used by other states in the 2020 elections. This bill would set minimum standards for a ballot tracking system that will meet the expectations of voters, resulting in increased transparency and confidence in administration of the election.

Some mail-in ballots were rejected and not counted in the 2020 election because of relatively minor problems such as not signing the outer return envelope. As many as 18 states have formal processes that allow voters to cure these minor problems so their vote can be counted. While at least some local boards of elections in Maryland did alert voters and allow them to cure problems, there is not currently a uniform statewide standard or process. This bill would establish a uniform ballot curing process that will ensure all voters are treated equitably no matter where they live in the state.

Voting is the foundation of our democracy, and we believe it is essential to racial and social justice to make registration and voting as accessible and convenient as possible for every individual who is eligible.

We urge a favorable report on HB 1047.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has approximately 800,000 members.