

March 16, 2021  
Senate Education, Health & Environment Affairs Committee  
Testimony from Caroline King, California, Md.

**HB0655**  
**FAVORABLE**

Mr. Chair, Madam Vice Chair and members of the Senate Education, Health, & Environmental Affairs Committee:

I am testifying today as Chair of the St. Mary's County Democratic Central Committee.

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. Our five 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 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 racially 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 fair and balanced, 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.

This Redistricting Board will draw County Commissioner and Board of Education district lines that will be in effect for 10 years. The Commissioners are currently delaying appointments to the Board. Although they had advertised and sought applicants for the Board in January, they chose to delay appointments until after they receive Census data, which also happens to be after the fate of HB0655 is decided.

Tellingly, one Commissioner stated: "[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? Are they looking to exclude Democrats so they can gerrymander our Commissioner districts? It sounds like our Commissioners are playing politics with what should be a bi-partisan process.

I point all this out not to argue that Democrats deserve to win a County Commissioner seat, but to show you why our County Commissioners so vehemently oppose this bill. It's not about local control; it's about maintaining Republican control. I have heard them say repeatedly that "no one is asking for this." On the contrary, this bill is actually widely supported by Democrats in St. Mary's County.

With regard to HB0655, 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. At their Feb. 23 meeting, they proposed putting this issue to referendum, and if that didn't work out, doing away with County Commissioner districts altogether.

The voter registration gap between Republicans and Democrats in St. Mary's is small, yet we have five Republican Commissioners. Something is not right. 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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