

Testimony: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee- March 18, 2021

Dear Sir,

I am Dr. Janice Walthour from St. Mary's County in support of HB655. Many districts in Maryland have been operating under the Commission Government system of voting. This allows voting for commissioners and Board of Education members at large and not per district. A change to per district would mean that winning the plurality of votes from his/ her district would give credence to individuals in that district. It doesn't prohibit the commissioner or board member from advocating for citizens in other districts. Why assign districts if voters in other districts can garner a plurality of votes for the candidate representing your district? This dilutes voters' voices and is not representative government.

A change in the process could positively impact many of the people in the Lexington Park and Great Mills voting areas in the county's Fourth Commissioner District. The majority of the people in the county live in this district many in these areas. It comprises more people of color than in other districts; more live below the poverty line and receive public assistance. Five of the Title-One schools are in this district. Yet, commissioners and Board of Ed members representing demographics like these can garner support from citizens outside of the district and get the right to represent people in districts like this where perhaps he/ she did not get the most votes. This leads to a vast majority of disenfranchised voters of color and lower socio-economic levels. It creates a conundrum of whose interests are being served, voters from other districts voting in higher numbers or voters in need in the commissioner's home district? Though elected to serve the entire county, when opposed to sorely needed resources for communities not in their assigned district the rationale used by some commissioners is that people in their assigned districts are opposed it. And, this system makes it easy for elected officials assigned to a district pass the responsibility or the buck to others on the board and not be held accountable for their failure to act.

There has not been a county commissioner of color since the 1990s. And we have had the same person of color on the school board assigned to the same district for about 20 years. This new process could provide the opportunity for more diverse representation throughout the county. Support HB655.