



TALBOT COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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Senator Brian E Feldman, Chair
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Opposition to HB410

My name is Tamara Stafford and I am the Election Director for Talbot County. I am writing to strongly oppose HB410 – Election Reform Act of 2023. The bill, with the amendments added in the Ways and Means Committee, is very different from the initial bill that MAEO supported and, as it exists currently, would add an undue burden on our Local Board of Elections.

The initial purpose of this bill was to ensure that voters were aware of changes in polling place locations and to address a potential exploit in the PIA process that could cause issues with the election preparation process.

However, an amendment unrelated to the original focus was added, significantly altering the bill's intent. The new requirements for polling place plans are burdensome and require a lengthy process, which would be challenging to manage during the busy election season. Additionally, there is no additional funding allocated to support these significant changes, further straining our limited resources.

The amendment's requirement that the total number of precinct polling places should be comparable to the 2018 general election will cause many issues. This rule does not account for the fact that Local Boards of Elections face difficulties in finding suitable buildings that comply with our security, ADA, and space requirements. Furthermore, meeting this requirement would require us to hire and train more judges, which is challenging even with the expected increase in pay.

This amendment uses as a template a pre-pandemic year to face the post-pandemic reality. Maryland has improved voting opportunities with its expanded mail-in ballot system and offers robust in-person early voting opportunities. This past election there was an absence of significant complaints about the number of polling places. Strict adherence to precinct polling places requirements robs our local boards of the needed flexibility we rely upon to address our unique county needs, strained resources, and other inclement situations.

In 2021, the Talbot County Board of Elections made the decision to decrease the number of polling places from 11 in 2018 to 10 in 2022. One of the buildings used in 2018 is no longer available, and there are no other buildings to utilize as polling places in the precinct. The relocated precinct shares a polling place in an adjoining precinct, 6.4 miles away. The polling place is located in a public school and provides better accessibility to voters.

The board action met the provisions of existing Section 10-101. However, under the proposed bill, Talbot County would be in violation, as the decrease in polling places is more than 5% of the total number of polling places used in 2018. House Bill 410 will require the local board to establish a polling place in a location where a suitable building does not exist, when the local board has already determined the best solution.

While we are not planning a reduction of polling places in 2024, House Bill 410 does not provide provisions for areas where precincts may need to share a polling place because of a lack of suitable buildings. This creates an unnecessary challenge for the local boards and leaves the voters without an accessible polling place.

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please contact me at 410-770-8098 or tammy.stafford@maryland.gov.

Sincerely,

Tamara Stafford
Election Director