

Madam Chair, Vice-Chair and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, I'm Charlene Pullias, Treasurer of the Garrett County Democratic Club and I want to thank you for letting me testify before your Committee in support of House Bill 447 which would require Maryland county commissioners be elected by a plurality of the vote in their own district.

Only 4 of our 23 counties would be affected by the change because 83% of our counties recognize the basic fairness of district voting over county-wide voting. Our closest neighbor, Allegheny County, has district voting because they know that the district structure provides a stronger voice when there is an issue that affects one geographic location but not the whole county. Another neighbor, Washington County, has a district system because they want the concerns of Hagerstown to be vigorously represented but not at the expense of the more rural areas of their county. Additionally, Fredrick County recognizes that a minority of the whole is entitled to a voice and should not be drowned out by a county wide structure organized to dismiss the concerns of a district.

Garrett County is out of step with not only Western Maryland, but with the whole state of Maryland.

The practice of allowing county wide voting in multiple commissioner districts is undemocratic. Districts are created so that voter's concerns from a specific geographic area can be aggressively addressed. If the issue is in conflict with concerns from other districts the commissioner will be restrained in their advocacy because they are beholden to voters county wide. In every case the minority view will not be well represented because to do so would alienate the rest of the county.

The current practice in Garrett also limits those who can successfully run for office. If you do not have the funds to run county wide then you have no chance of success in a district seat. Simple math tells us that it costs two thirds less to run a district campaign to run county wide. Two thirds less for yard signs, two thirds less to purchase campaign literature and two thirds less time used in contacting voters and getting out the vote. In our county there are lots of committed civic activists who can't afford to run county wide. This is not a bug in the system, this is the reason for the system.

I encourage your support for this worthwhile legislation.