

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and distinguished members of the committee,

I write today to ask for your **unfavorable report** on HB597.

This bill would create a straw poll on the ballot for the November general election of 2024 asking voters if they favor the current at-large system of electing county commissioners in St. Mary's County, or if they favor changing that method to voting by-district. Under the current at-large format, voters from across the county vote for all five county commissioners, even though four of the five must reside in and run for a specific district.

Voting in the at-large format makes the vote of each individual less powerful. A vote for the preferred candidate in any given district can be counterbalanced by the votes from the other three districts in the county. This leads to accountability issues in our local government.

Proponents of HB597 are billing it as a "referendum" but it is decidedly not. A referendum would be legally binding, meaning that if voters selected to change the way county commissioners were elected then changes would have to be made prior to the next election, in 2026. Instead, this is only a straw poll, with specific language stating "the vote on this question is advisory only."

One local "newspaper," The County Times, which is owned and operated by a former Republican County Commissioner President, Thomas McKay, has engaged in propaganda around this matter and is willfully misleading voters. Many in the St. Mary's County Republican Party, including a member of their Central Committee, and others including Mr. McKay, have openly advocated and testified against HB447, the bill seeking to change our process to voting by-district.

It is notable that the St. Mary's County Commissioners, all Republicans, have expressed support for HB597, as have Republican members of the St. Mary's County Delegation.

It is the right of any individual to express their opinions. However, when one of two local newspapers is controlled by a biased operator, and frequently publishes falsehoods or mistruths, I have little hope that voters of our county will be factually informed enough to make an educated decision on this "straw poll."

I do not disagree that voters should voice their opinion on this matter, and they have the chance to do so by testifying on this bill, or on HB447. What I do disagree with are the clear attempts to mislead the public about this issue in order to influence public opinion.

Making this a partisan issue, when it is really a voting rights concern, is not leading with truth. For that reason, I oppose HB597.

Brandon Russell
Brandon Russell for St. Mary's County