

TESTIMONY OFFERED IN FAVOR

HB 447

Local Elections – County Commissioner—District Voting

Committee on Ways and Means

Offered by Ms. Jessica Jolly

February 14, 2023

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

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of HB 447 and to explain why the passage of by/in-district election of county commissioners is important to the St. Mary's County community.

Although I am an officer of the St. Mary's County Democratic Central Committee, which also supports this bill, I am testifying as an individual because I believe this bill is about *democratic representation* not Democratic—or Republican—advantage.

In this matter, two terms can become confusing in public discussion: “**by-district**” and/or “in-district” here means that only the voters within a district vote for the commissioner from that district; “at-large” voting means that while a candidate must reside in a certain district, all the voters in the county vote for all the district candidates.

I am testifying on behalf of “by-” or “in-district” election of St. Mary's County commissioners as HB 447 would bring about.¹

My two main reasons for supporting this change are these:

1. The current system of *run-by-district* but *elect-at-large* negates the very point of districts. The change proposed in this bill increases commissioners'

¹ Currently, the four district commissioners must reside separately among Districts 1, 2, 3, or 4 but they are voted into office *at-large* by all county voters. (The president of the commissioners may reside in any of the districts and is, logically in this case, elected at large.)

accountability to their home district residents. In our current structure of at-large voting on district representatives, those who “represent” a particular district may easily ignore the special needs of their home districts. That is, while a commissioner nominally represents a particular area, that commissioner may ignore issues important within the district with no direct way to be held accountable for such a decision.

True, the current system was created decades ago, when St. Mary’s County was dramatically smaller, less diverse, and still reliant on tobacco and seafood to a degree no longer true today. That change increased the Board from three to five members, reflecting an awareness of the potential growth of the county. HB 447 simply and logically takes that reform a step further by tying more closely, with greater accountability, the district representatives to their home district constituents.

2. Furthermore, the supposed county-wide “benefit” of the current at-large system may appear to promote county “harmony,” but in reality its primary benefit is to protect incumbency and to ignore views and needs of localized parts of the county, effectively leaving the district’s residents out of the debate.

Indeed, the At-Large voting system “waters down” the effectiveness of district constituents. In St. Mary’s County, this may reduce the representational power of rural citizens who might not want their section of the county to be over-developed or industrialized by the actions of a few who do not live there. It may override the educational and recreational needs of communities of minorities, working class citizens, as well of different concentrations of wealth and poverty.

Thus, “*We have no problem*” is often actually “*We hear no problem*” which leads easily to “*We pay no price for ignoring a problem.*”

Please adopt a favorable recommendation on **House Bill 447**.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Jolly

Citizen, St. Mary’s County of Maryland