

Good afternoon Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important issue. My name is Andrew Saundry and I am here as a private citizen and resident of District 15.

Filling vacancies in the Maryland General Assembly is a challenging process and well-intentioned Legislators, activists, and Central Committee-members may disagree about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Of course, we recognize that there is no substitute for a duly elected member completing the term to which they were selected by the residents of their district, but such vacancies do occur and no method of filling them is devoid of flaw. The choice before you today is between a flawed status quo and a better alternative.

Those in favor of replacing appointments with irregular special elections in all cases (as happens in Virginia) complain that the current appointments process does not adequately reflect the will of the voters. In Montgomery County (and across Maryland), the Central Committees are composed of individuals from across the county, only a small minority of whom reside in the affected district. These Committee members were chosen primarily not by the residents of the district to make such a decision on their behalf, but by the residents of several other districts. No such system, they contend, is representative of the interests or perspectives of that district.

Those opposed to special elections fairly respond that the current appointments process lowers barriers of entry for non-traditional candidates, who may have a harder time running in a special election due to costs, disability, age, or work schedules. They argue that under the current system, the delegation has become more diverse, while also ensuring the elevation of qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable legislators. Opponents cite the low turnout numbers and high expenses for special elections at abnormal times.

HB0417 strikes a perfect balance between the two—retaining the benefits of the current system while providing for direct feedback from voters—by creating special elections in Presidential election years for appointees who are selected in the first two years of a term. Because this is concurrent with a presidential election, it will not cost more to administer and it keeps open the path for non-traditional candidates. This proposal enables appointees to serve for up to two sessions before facing an election, while giving the voters an opportunity to make their voices heard about that appointee and their record.

HB0417 is the best of both worlds, so I urge you to give favorable recommendation. Thank you!!