

Testimony Before the Ways and Means Committee on HB 1109 - 3/5/24

Election Law - Registered Voter List and Petitions (Ballot Petition Modernization Act)

Prepared By Linda Dorsey-Walker, MBA, Chair
4MORE! 4BALTIMORECOUNTY Ballot Issue Committee
(443) 929-0652 LRDWALK4@AOL.COM

Good morning. Chair Atterbeary, and members of the Ways and Means Committee, I am Linda Dorsey-Walker, Chair of the 4MORE!4BALTIMORECOUNTY Ballot Issue Committee, also known as VOTE4MORE!, a group that endorsed by 30 organizations. This year HB 1109 where 11 co-sponsors, including most of the Baltimore County delegation and Speaker Pro Tem Dana Stein support passage of this overdue legislation that modernizes the petition process and fixes a gap in the election law that impacts people with disabilities, seniors and others, Moreover, all of the referenced Baltimore County delegates have signed the VOTE4MORE! petition.

I wish to testify IN FAVOR OF HB 1109 with the following friendly Amendment. Specifically, **that this Act shall take effect on June 1, 2024, not October 1, 2024, as originally proposed by Del. Sheila Ruth in 2022. Since VOTE4MORE! that has worked for passage of this legislation for three years now, we want to avail ourselves of the digital process to add our referendum question to the 2024 General Election ballot.**

The 4MORE! 4BALTIMORECOUNTY Ballot Initiative, also known as VOTE4MORE!, wants to amend the Baltimore County Charter to create four more County Council districts, thereby reducing district sizes from by far the largest in Maryland 123,000 residents per district down to 78,000.

Under the present law 10,000 certifiable in-person, face to face signatures must be collected in order to add a referendum question to a General Election ballot. The current paper ballot petition system is archaic, fails to reflect how most Americans live today. Most important, does not provide a mechanism for many disabled individuals to access the petition process, highlighting a huge gap in the disability rights law which does not mention accessing the written petition process..

Using an electronic or digital signature, as proposed by the bill as an additional, not a replacement option to written petitions, nor is it a new or unfamiliar idea. The SBE previously allowed the digital collection of petition signatures in both 2020 and 2021. The digital signature method worked flawlessly, was fast accurate, and did not use valuable BOE staff time.. After shifting to a system that used modern technology during the COVID pandemic, the State Board of Election suddenly stopped in 2022.

- 1) An electronic format not only allows greater privacy, but also allows disabled persons and seniors who I have personally encountered who are blind, deaf, quadriplegic, paraplegic, amputees, stroke survivors, and even one very rare 65 year old Thalidomide baby survivor, the ability utilize assistive equipment in their homes to read the petition multiple times before signing, and the ability to sign.
- 2) From a public safety and public health standpoint, collecting signatures electronically does not waste board of election staff time because there were not thousands of forms to handle sort and number. and there was a zero error rate.
- 3) Digital petitioning is more sanitary, fairer, and more transparent for individuals who are disabled and have may have limited flexible use of their hands, the blind, and seniors who has limited visual acuity.
- 4) The archaic State petition form that has been used for decades uses about a 9 point font and has very narrow lines making it near impossible for older voters to sign. Moreover, it asks for some information that is optional without stating it is optional.
- 5) While the Election law states that ballot petition committee requires 10,000 signatures to have a referendum question placed on a ballot, we were advised from the start by SBE staff that we should collect a minimum of 25% to 30 % more signatures than required because of high error rates.
- 6) Two years ago, a well-funded ballot initiative in Anne Arundel generated and submitted 11,000 signatures. Organizers waited nearly a then nearly a month only to learn that 5, 532 of the signatures were disallowed - a 51% rate, which was possibly the highest petition disallowance rates in the entire U.S.
- 7) In late May 2022, the 4MORE! Ballot Issue Committee attempted to turn in the first 2000 signatures it collected for review to avoid what happened to the Anne Arundel County ballot Committee, however, our request for a partial review was refused. Under the current law there is no opportunity to cure signatures,
- 8) The implementation of a modern digital signature collection method brings the error or rejection rate down to near zero because the computer will not allow anything but accurate information to be submitted,
- 9) The digital signature method greatly reduces local board of elections costs, as it is a major time saver and safer for their office staff because there would be zero staff required to scan, review, judge and handle thousands of pieces of possibly contaminated paper.
- 10) When electronic signatures were used there was not a single accusation of fraud, and not one person complained about their privacy rights being disregarded, or too much personal information collected. In addition, no disabled person claimed their right to an accessible petition process was ignored.
- 11) Several other states including Massachusetts, Michigan, Utah, Colorado allow the collect of petition electronically. The Maryland SBE already owns the technology.

I urge the Committee return a favorable report for HB1109 with the recommended friendly amendment to change the enactment date to 6/1/24.