

Date: November 16, 2020

Memo To: Mt Vernon District Democratic Committee/ FCDC

Subject: early voting embarrassment in Fairfax County

While we are all glad that the 2020 election is finally over, I wish to relay some concerns about the 2020 early voting process that I believe the MVDDC and FCDC should raise with the Fairfax County Office of Elections. And I believe strongly that these issues need to be addressed prior to the planning for the 2021 elections, to avoid the problems that plagued the recent election.

The first few days of early voting, starting September 18, in Fairfax County were characterized by long lines and waits of over 2 hours, sometimes 3 hours in length. This situation was no better once the satellite sites opened in October 14. Lines were at least 45 minutes long and often over 2 hours at the multiple voting sites I personally observed, including Mt Vernon Government Center, Franconia and Laurel Hill Golf Course in Lorton. By report from others as well as in the media, similar delays existed at the other county sites as well.

And while I was impressed that most voters seemed willing to wait these long and often physically uncomfortable waits in heat, in rain and frigid wind, the delays in Fairfax County had measurable negative impact. First, we should consider the impact on the citizens of Fairfax County: elderly people waiting on line for over 2 hours to vote, people having to take long stretches of time off work to go vote, mothers with small children in strollers or on foot waiting for hours. If we conservatively estimate an average of 1 hour waiting time, and there were 192,396 early in person voters- think of the incredible time commitment just to vote!

Secondly, there is the impact on voter turnout. It's not hard to imagine people discouraged to vote by the extensive lines at the early voting sites. According to data from Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP.org) and the Virginia State Board of Elections (elections.virginia.gov) Fairfax had a much lower percentage of early in-person votes cast than the rest of Northern Virginia. Statewide, early in person voting was 31%.

In nearby Northern Virginia jurisdictions:

- Arlington Co- 36%
- Fauquier Co- 37%
- Loudoun Co- 32%
- Prince William Co- 37%
- Fairfax Co- 25%, a significantly lower participation rate.

This affected the total early vote total for the county (combining both early-in-person and mail in ballots):

In Northern Va overall, (including the above counties as well as Alexandria City, Fairfax City, Falls Church City, Manassas City and Manassas Park City) the average was 56% Fairfax Co falls significantly below the regional average at 53.6%. Our immediate neighbor Prince William had 57%.

As of this writing, the final voter outcome for the localities has not yet been reported, but if this trend holds, and Fairfax is below the regional turnout, it could have significant repercussions for future close elections. Preliminary data does however confirm that the total voter participation in Fairfax DECREASED this year compared to 2016, from 82.5% of active registered voters to 79.4%

(<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections/sites/elections/files/assets/result/resu1120.pdf>; https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/elections/sites/elections/files/assets/result/historical/2016_11_november_general_results.pdf) This 3.1% decrease could be determinative in a close state-wide race.

I had an opportunity to witness first hand the voting operations at early voting sites in both Fairfax and Prince William county. There was never more than a 5 minute wait at the Prince William County site. The improved performance there was attributable to several factors: longer hours, better physical layout, better logistics, a much better and quicker check in process (the check-in clerk printed the appropriate ballot and tracking sheet at the time of check-in), and especially, better staffing including dedicated staff for curbside voting. (We were told in August that there were so many volunteers to help with Fairfax voting they couldn't train or use them all. Multiple people told me of volunteering only to never hear back. When I asked one Fairfax official why the performance in Fairfax County was so poor, I was told that, in part, there weren't enough volunteers.) Even minor details distinguished the 2 counties early voting process. The curbside voting in PW County was well marked and easily accessible with large legible signs, while at the Fairfax sites I observed, the signage was handwritten, small and inconspicuous.

Many of these features could have been used in Fairfax County to improve the voting experience here.

In Prince William County, (registered voters 296,116) there were 3 early voting sites distributed throughout the county operating as of Sept 18 until Oct 31 while Fairfax (registered voters 761,658 voters) had only 1 at the County Government Center. This is a location that is very difficult for large parts of the population to get to, especially if they live east of 95 or are dependent on public transportation. Then when satellite sites opened in mid October, Prince William County went to 8 sites, open a minimum of 8.5 hours per day, whilst Fairfax County had 14 sites, open fewer hours per day.

The Fairfax County Office of Elections and the County Board of Supervisors owe the citizens of Fairfax an explanation about the suboptimal experience in the early voting period in this critical election. Yes, this was an unusual year- with the Coronavirus epidemic and Virginia's new rules re: early voting. But other jurisdictions did better, and so should we.

An after action analysis might identify areas of potential improvement but at minimum the Office of Elections should consider:

1. More early voting sites, especially in the extended early voting period.
2. Longer hours at all early voting sites.
3. Better staffing at sites.
4. Commit the financial resources to effect the above suggestions.

Of the many services our county and local governments provide with our tax dollars, there is none more important to a functioning society than competent, secure and effective elections. Fairfax County must do better.

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