

Democracy North Carolina

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COUNTY ELECTION OFFICIALS SEEK RELEASE OF FUNDS FROZEN BY NC GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Election officials from more than 85 counties have sent a letter to NC General Assembly leaders, urging them to release \$4 million designated for improving the administration of the 2012 elections. See letter at: <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/CBOELetterHAVAFunds.pdf>

The funds come from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 and are in a NC bank account that has been used for years, but the General Assembly must appropriate an additional \$660,000 to the State Board of Elections to meet federal guidelines before the final \$4 million can be spent.

The letter from the bipartisan group of election board members says the HAVA funds are urgently needed to pay for additional early voting locations, maintenance of voting machines and poll-worker training. County election officials are submitting budget requests to their county commissioners for the fiscal year beginning July 1, and many have been told they won't get funding to open as many early voting sites as they did in the last presidential election.

“We expect a large voter turnout, especially in the fall, and many counties will be holding elections with new district lines, split precincts, and other changes that complicate voter education and administration,” the letter says. “In addition, many counties face very tight budgets and need assistance to provide adequate Early Voting facilities to relieve the pressure of long lines on Election Day.”

It ends with an appeal: “As board of elections members from across the state, we urge you to find a way to release the HAVA funds.”

The letter continues to gather more signers. It had board members from 77 counties late last week when it was first sent to legislative leaders after a week of collecting signatures; 87 were represented Monday morning, including the Republican board members from 40 counties.

The Republican-led General Assembly included a provision in the state budget [Section 26.1] barring the state elections board from using the funds to make grants to counties until the board received a level of funding that was \$660,000 above what was appropriated, effectively freezing the HAVA funds.

Several nonpartisan groups are asking their supporters to contact the General Assembly to push for release of the funds.

“We're worried that the new leadership doesn't understand the importance of these funds because holding them back will make voting more difficult and needlessly adds risks to our elections,” said Bob Hall of the elections watchdog group Democracy North Carolina.

“The House has already passed a bill [H-658] to cut a week off the early voting period,” he noted. “Freezing these funds will prevent dozens of early voting places from opening, and that will create long lines, more pressure and the potential for big problems on Election Day.”

Three months ago, on November 7, 2011, State Board of Elections executive director Gary Bartlett wrote to leaders of the House and Senate election committee chairs, requesting the release of the remaining HAVA funds. “It seems prudent to ultimately expend all HAVA funds in FY 2011-2012 to improve the administration of elections,” he said.

He pointed out that the funds could support county expenses for poll-work training, voting machine testing and maintenance, primary and election day technical support, and additional early voting sites “to cut down on excessive lines on election day.”

For Bartlett’s email and background on HAVA, see:
<http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/HAVAFundsFactsheet.pdf>

In a recent interview, Bartlett said the lack of funding likely means counties would operate 100 fewer early voting sites than the 368 sites opened in 2008. More than \$1 million in HAVA Title II grants supported additional sites in 2008.

The HAVA funds have also paid for annual voting machine maintenance fees totaling about \$3 million statewide, a charge that will now fall on the counties. The machine vendor is liable for the cost of running a new election if machine failure causes significant problems; consequently, the vendor’s technicians service, test, and if necessary replace thousands of pieces of voting equipment under its contract, for an annual fee.

“Our fee in this small county is \$20,000 and the county commissioners will have to find a way to pay it for the first time beginning July 1 because of the frozen funds,” said John R. (Jack) Hudson Jr., president of Election Boards Association of North Carolina and chair of the Transylvania County Board of Elections. “I’m sure the fee is in the six figures for the large counties. That impacts all the other aspects of local budgets for administering elections.”

“The state has money in the bank specifically designated to help our elections run smoothly,” said Jo Nicholas, president of the League of Women Voters of North Carolina. “We need our legislators to release these funds to ensure that we have a voting system that is secure, accessible and fair.”

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