



SOUTHERN COALITION for SOCIAL JUSTICE

VIA E-MAIL

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cc: Tina Bledsoe, Director of the Robeson County Board of Elections

Recommendations for 2020 Early Voting Plan

Dear Members of the Robeson County Board of Elections,

We write to you today to provide you with information that we believe will assist you in developing an early voting plan that best serves the constituents of your county. We recognize that the challenge that faces you and your staff—conducting a safe and fully participatory election during a global pandemic—is one of the greatest magnitude, and we want to help you confront that challenge with as many resources and as much support as possible.

Executive Summary

As discussed in more detail below, based on voting and demographic data specific to Robeson County and in anticipation of the challenges introduced by the ongoing public health crisis, we recommend for the upcoming general election that the Board (i) maintain at least the six early voting sites that Robeson had in 2016 and (ii) ensure that the Robeson County Board of Elections and the Pembroke Library are specifically used as early voting sites. Additionally, to ensure Black voters have equal access to early voting, we also recommend (iii) using the Fairmont Fire Hall/Senior Citizen Center, the Gilbert Patterson Maxton Library, and the Red Springs Community Center as early voting sites.

Over the coming months, our team of advocates will work with civic engagement organizations, faith groups, and community leaders to solicit feedback on early voting sites. These individuals will attend Board of Election meetings, provide public comment, and may reach out to you with questions and requests. We will also incorporate this information into future early voting plan recommendations.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Potential Changes to State Law

All North Carolinians—voters and election administrators alike—are facing unprecedented circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The North Carolina State Board of Elections has predicted that absentee-by-mail voting in this year’s general election could hit 40%, up from only 4% in 2016. Assuming that number is accurate for planning purposes, that means that a majority of voters will still vote in-person. However, unlike in

previous years, election officials and poll workers now have social distancing and disinfectant procedures to take into account when conducting early in-person voting. This means that, even if in-person voting during the early voting period will be lower than in 2016, offering more sites and days is more critical than ever to keep in-person voting safe and prevent voters who are socially distancing from turning away from the polls due to long lines and crowding. For public health reasons, counties should be seeking to have enough sites and days for in-person voting to keep the rate of voters (voters per hour per site) low so that voters can maintain distance while waiting to vote and to ensure that poll workers have time to employ proper disinfecting procedures between voters. This will not be possible if there are too many voters seeking to use an early voting site at one time.

Additionally, we urge you to at least make contingency plans for an early voting period unencumbered by current state law, which is under challenge. Democracy North Carolina (“DemNC”) is a plaintiff (represented by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (“SCSJ”) among others) challenging certain aspects of the current statutory election scheme as creating an unconstitutional burden on the right to vote in light of the current public health crisis. The part of that lawsuit most relevant here is our challenge to the uniform hours requirement, created by Senate Bill 325 in 2018 and in effect in the 2018 general election and 2020 primary elections (in addition to intervening municipal elections). We are seeking to have this law (and others) enjoined for the 2020 general election to allow county boards the flexibility to offer more sites when more voters are expected to turn out to vote (and thus reduce lines and wait times and increase the efficacy of public health measures) and not waste precious county resources keeping early voting sites open at hours it is known that voters will not utilize.

We understand that the imposition of the uniform hours requirement has made it more difficult for county boards, including yours, to craft an early voting plan that best serves the geographic and demographic needs of your county, and that maintaining sites when all sites have to be open the same days and hours can have a significant budgetary impact on your county. Indeed, many counties reduced the number of early voting sites and weekend early voting hours in 2018 compared to the number of sites offered in 2014 (the most recent analogous election). In the litigation described above, our goal is to avoid this situation.

**That being said, even with those unnecessary restrictions, we believe that it still remains your duty to ensure that all voters in your county have easy access to one-stop early voting sites and times, regardless of the outcome of the litigation.** We recognize that by having to keep every site open 12 hours a day during the weekdays, and having to have all sites open if any site is open on the weekend, could create some financial challenges for the county, but the cost of a fair and accessible democracy can never be too high.

We understand that for many counties, one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been budgetary concerns and potential shortfalls. We urge you to remember that access to the franchise is both the central service offered by counties and mandated by state and federal law. If counties do not conduct an election that allows full and safe participation, accountability and oversight on other budgetary decisions will be impeded. We know that the county boards of elections do not set budgets, but your county commission is obligated to fully fund your efforts to conduct an election compliant with all federal and state constitutional and statutory demands. *See* N.C.G.S. § 163-37 (requiring county commission to “appropriate reasonable and adequate funds necessary for the legal functions of the county board of elections, including reasonable and just compensation of the director of elections”); *see also* NC SBOE Numbered Memorandum 2016-06; *Graham County Board of Elections v. Graham County Board of Commissioners*, 212 N.C. App. 313, 712 S.E.2d 372 (N.C. App. June 7, 2011) (holding

that the grant of authority to the county commission on budget issues is limited by more specific statutory delegations of authority to the county board of elections). If the county commission provides inadequate funding, they are in violation of state law and can be forced to make the necessary appropriations. And while the county board of elections can go back to the county commission with further evidence of financial shortfalls in conducting elections and request further appropriations, *see* N.C.G.S. § 159-15, the burden of doing so while conducting an election during a pandemic is significant. To the extent the Board of Elections is predicting near certain costs now, the county commission should make appropriations to address those needs rather than burden the Board of Elections later.

**We strongly urge that, notwithstanding the additional cost, the county treat the six sites offered during the 2016 election as the baseline number of sites that should be offered this election.** We recognize that this may require going back to the Robeson County Board of County Commissioners to readdress the budget for this election: please keep in mind that we believe the North Carolina State Board of Elections and Ethics Enforcement has the authority to force you to offer additional voting sites and hours if there is no unanimous plan and the plans under consideration by the county board offer too few voting opportunities in ways that may, for instance, disproportionately disadvantage voters of color. The more prudent course of action is to plan on offering a fulsome early voting plan now, and not be forced to scramble last minute to cover costs if the State Board requires you to offer more hours or sites. Additionally, we also strongly urge you to request a calendar of events for early voting sites to ensure you are able to prepare for any overlapping events, and specifically to mitigate any potential impact those events may have on voter turnout.

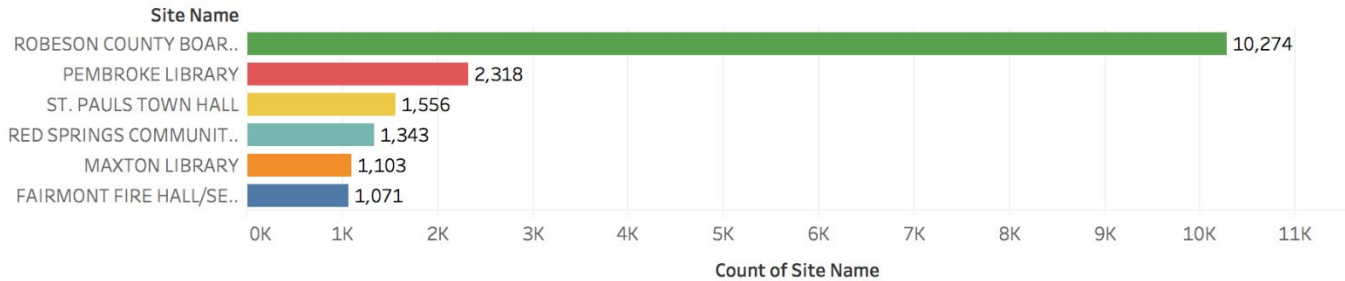
#### *Early Voting Plan Recommendations*

We do recognize that budgetary concerns may still come into play. With that in mind, we think there are several priorities this Board should embrace in the development of an early voting plan for the November 2020 election.

#### **1. Prioritizing Highly Used Sites with Near High Concentrations of Voters**

While we do think it is possible to maintain six sites in 2020, if it turns out that is not feasible, we ask that this Board take both a data-driven and community-informed approach to deciding which sites to open. Below is a chart for the six sites utilized in the 2016 general election. While of course some sites available in 2016 may no longer be available, either due to COVID-19 or other extenuating circumstances, the popularity of certain sites, and their geographic location, is still informative:

## Robeson County Early Voting Location Use - 2016



Count of Site Name for each Site Name. Color shows details about Site Name. The marks are labeled by count of Site Name. The data is filtered on Ballot Req Type, which keeps ONE-STOP.



Likewise, attached as Exhibit A is a chart showing the number of voters per site in the 2018 midterm election. Based on sheer usage alone, it is clear that the Robeson County Board of Elections Office is heavily utilized during the early voting period. However, usage numbers ought to be further informed by demographic data and community perspective. A closer look shows that while Pembroke Library sees far less traffic than the County Board of Elections Office, the location is disproportionately used by Robeson County’s Native American voters, who made up the overwhelming majority of voters at that location, including 75.7% in 2016 and 83.6% in 2018.

The importance of this location to the Native American voters of Robeson County is further emphasized when looking at which days during the early voting period had the highest proportions of Native American turnout:

Early Voting 2016	Th Oct 20	F Oct 21	M Oct 24	T Oct 25	W Oct 26	Th Oct 27	F Oct 28	Sa Oct 29	Su Oct 30	M Oct 31	T Nov 1	W Nov 2	T Nov 3	F Nov 4	Sa Nov 5
Total Voters	616	681	712	700	626	660	676	1754	308	714	2327	1943	2384	2896	668
% Native American Voters	15.6	16.9	13.1	15.0	17.9	17.3	18.1	24.5	9.4	18.1	29.2	29.5	29.2	28.6	19.6

= days with early voting hours at Pembroke Library

Furthermore, based on Democracy North Carolina’s deep organizing roots in this county and thus highly informed perspective, we believe that three sites in particular have been valuable for making voting easier for Black voters: the Fairmont Fire Hall/Senior Citizen Center, the Gilbert Patterson Maxton Library, and the Red Springs Community Center early voting locations. We thus recommend their usage in 2020. It is important that

as you develop an early voting plan for November, you listen to the advocates whose job it is to reach those voters and make sure they can get out to vote, and incorporate those advocates' knowledge into the decision-making process.

Finally, looking at the geographic dispersal of the early voting sites in 2016 (Exhibit B) and 2018 (Exhibit C), when compared to the precincts with the highest number of voters, *see* 2016 Robeson Early Voters by Precinct (Exhibit D), 2016 Robeson African-American Voters by Precinct (Exhibit E), *and* 2016 Robeson Native American Voters by Precinct (Exhibit F), it is clear that most of the county's voters, and especially its voters of color, are located outside of the city center. We urge you to take this into consideration when devising your early voting plan, and to focus on serving the greatest number of voters possible given the resources you may have.

**2. Prioritizing Days that Robeson County Voters Have Shown to Prefer and that Have Black Voter Usage**

Secondly, we also strongly recommend that you prioritize offering fulsome voting hours on days that are both highly utilized by voters in the county overall and that Black voters disproportionately use. This does two things: (1) ensures that the county is not wasting money and is operating early voting sites in a manner likely to reduce lines and wait times on Election Day, and (2) minimizes any burden on Black voters that might give rise to claims under the Voting Rights Act.

While voters per hour is but one metric, and should not be focused on in isolation, it is clear that end-of-week and weekend voting are popular days for early voting. Democracy NC organizers on the ground in Robeson conclude that Sunday voting has been very popular and effective in expanding the franchise, and we strongly urge you to retain it. Additionally, given the overwhelming popularity of the last Friday of early voting, we encourage you to consider expanding the hours offered this day.

Early Voting 2016	Th Oct 20	F Oct 21	M Oct 24	T Oct 25	W Oct 26	Th Oct 27	F Oct 28	Sa Oct 29	Su Oct 30	M Oct 31	T Nov 1	W Nov 2	T Nov 3	F Nov 4	Sa Nov 5
Total Voters	616	681	712	700	626	660	676	1754	308	714	2327	1943	2384	2896	668
Total Hours	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	33	4	12	52	50	52	52	5
Voters/Hour	68.4	75.7	79.1	77.8	69.6	73.3	75.1	53.2	77.0	59.5	44.7	38.9	45.9	55.7	133.6

Additionally, when examining on which days Black voters are more likely to vote, the need for robust early voting sites and hours and especially to retain Sunday voting opportunities becomes even more clear.

Early Voting 2016	Th Oct 20	F Oct 21	M Oct 24	T Oct 25	W Oct 26	Th Oct 27	F Oct 28	Sa Oct 29	Su Oct 30	M Oct 31	T Nov 1	W Nov 2	T Nov 3	F Nov 4	Sa Nov 5
Total Voters	616	681	712	700	626	660	676	1754	308	714	2327	1943	2384	2896	668
% African-American Voters	45.6	44.5	44.8	39.1	35.8	35.8	32.2	36.9	50.6	37.1	36.2	35.9	32.8	34.7	40.6

As the chart above demonstrates, the majority of voters overall voted during the last 8 days of early voting, but Black voters utilized each day of early voting in near similar numbers during the entire period. This indicates that preserving robust early voting sites and hours (and, indeed, expanding them) should be a priority for the county and that a decrease in early voting overall hours would disproportionately harm Black voters.

If you have any questions as you consider early voting plans (for the first time or revising them in light of litigation), or should you be unable to agree on a unanimous plan, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. Our goal is to ensure that the one-stop early voting plan adopted by or ordered into effect for Robeson County is one that ensures that voters are able to safely access their fundamental right to vote notwithstanding the current public health crisis.

Sincerely,

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