

Early voting plan too friendly to suburbs, critics say

BY LAYLA GARMS
THE CHRONICLE

Proposed early voting sites that favor suburban areas are a cause of concern for many.

During its meeting Monday afternoon, the three-member Forsyth County Board of Elections listened as residents expressed their reservations about a plan that would create early voting sites in Rural Hall, Lewisville, Kernersville and at the Forsyth County Government Center in downtown Winston-Salem for the upcoming primary election season. Republicans Ken Raymond and Stuart Russell approved the plan over the objections of Democrat Fleming El-Amin and many of those in attendance who argue that more early voting sites are needed in the city, where most of the county's voters reside.

"That decision ignored voters for geography, and that concerns me," said Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Board of Education member Elisabeth Motsinger. "What they basically did is did not make the needs of voters paramount to their decisions, which is their responsibility. Their responsibility is to make voting accessible to the citizens of Forsyth County."

Motsinger is up for reelection. She is an at-large member of the school board, so voters countywide will make selections in her race.

Philip Carter, a longtime community activist, told board members that the lack of early voting sites in the inner-city could dissuade some from participating in the process.

"It will also dilute the minority vote, as most minorities – Hispanic and African American – do live within the city," he reasoned.

El-Amin also believes that the majority's early voting plan is inequitable.

"The premise is that it's fair for the whole county, but the fact is that Winston-Salem constitutes the greatest population of the county," he



Charles Wilson addresses Board of Elections members (from left): Fleming El-Amin, Ken Raymond and Stuart Russell. Also pictured is clerk Judy Spears.

stated. "To put most of the voting sites in the county instead of the city to me is insulting."

On Tuesday, he appealed the board's decision to the state Board of Elections, offering an alternative plan with three voting sites – Carver School Road Branch Library, Lewisville Library and the Board of Elections – and extended hours at the Board of Elections on two weekday evenings. El-Amin says his plan is more equitable and economical, as it utilizes one fewer site.

"Their plan has an additional cost of \$5,000," he said, referencing the anticipated per-site cost. "We really can't afford that if we're going to be fiscally responsible."

Although he believes his plan is the better option for county voters, El-Amin said he wasn't optimistic about the state board, which also has a GOP majority, accepting his alternative.

"I'm a pragmatic fellow; I'll be surprised if they adopt it," he admitted. "But I'm looking forward to the arguments so that I can make the case."

Several residents also

asked the board to extend the evening hours to allow for voting after normal business hours or expand the voting schedule on Saturday May 3, the only weekend voting option during the primary early voting schedule.

"It is my understanding that there's only one Saturday voting time, and I would really appreciate it if the board would consider enlarging that," said Charles Campbell.

Wilson. "...I want us to be fair to workers in particular. They need that extra day."

Raymond did not respond directly to the requests, but moved to approve the pre-determined plan without any mention of extending or changing the hours.

Susan Campbell, president of the Forsyth County Democratic Party, called the plan "a little lopsided." She questioned the wisdom of a plan that supplies three sites for 25 percent of county voters and one site – the Board of Elections – for the other 75 percent. The Rural Hall Branch Library, which is in the vicinity of only about 2,000 eligible voters, compared to the more

than 9,000 voters close to inner city sites like the Carver School Road Branch Library, is particularly puzzling, Campbell said. County voters tend to lean conservative, while voters within the city limits historically have tended to favor progressive candidates, making the plan even more suspect, Campbell said.

"My first reaction is, 'Well, what about the voters who vote our way – our party' – but it's not just about that to me," she commented. "It just makes sense (to have the majority of the sites in the city). It's a reasonable way to look at it."

Raymond told meeting attendees that the sites were spread out in an effort to provide convenient early voting options for citizens countywide.

"We are not the Board of Elections just for Winston-Salem. We have to serve the entire county," he said. "...We're doing our best to meet the requirements (of new voting laws) and to be absolutely as fair as we possibly can."

Valene Franco, a candidate for the newly-created seat on the Forsyth County District Court bench, said the county locations might make voting difficult for voters who rely on public transportation to get around.

"We definitely want to

make sure that we are providing as much access as possible for everybody who would like to cast an early vote," said Franco, a longtime Legal Aid attorney who will be seeking the votes countywide for the non-partisan seat. "...There are a lot more people coming out in the city areas to early vote, and I think the more people that vote, the better."

Raymond limited each community member to three minutes each to comment on the topic of their choosing, and reserved his responses for the end of the comment period, offering no opportunity for follow-up questions or rebuttals. After briefly addressing some of the statements that were made, Raymond closed the public comment session and proceeded with the meeting.

"I believe I have addressed the issues that were brought up, so I am going to move on," he said.

Campbell said she was infuriated with Raymond's virtual dismissal of the concerns raised by citizens at the meeting.

"I thought we all made some reasonable comments and they didn't pay attention to anything we said," she declared. "...It just feels unfair, whether you're looking at party politics or not."

Novant hosting Health Exchange info session

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

In anticipation of the March 31 enrollment deadline for the Health Insurance Marketplace (also known as the Health Exchange), Novant Health will host an education session for community members who need to sign up for a plan or who have questions about the Marketplace.

The drop-in event will take place on Thursday, Feb. 27 from 2 to 6 p.m. at the Conference Center at Novant Health Forsyth Medical Center, 3333 Silas Creek Parkway.

Trusted brokers and financial navigators will be onsite to answer questions and enroll participants in Marketplace plans. Prediabetes, obesity and blood pressure screenings will also be available.

"March 31 is the last day to sign up for insurance plans through the Marketplace," said Bob Seehausen, Novant Health senior vice president of business development and sales. "We know navigating the Marketplace – including if you qualify for a federal subsidy – can be confusing, and that's why Novant Health wants to make sure our community members have a place where they can get their questions answered and receive assistance signing up for a plan."

As of Oct. 1, Americans who are uninsured, purchase their own health insurance, or are looking for coverage that fits their budget may be eligible to purchase insurance through the Marketplace. All Marketplace plans will:

- Cover doctor visits, hospitalizations, maternity care, emergency room care and prescriptions.
- Not deny coverage for pre-existing conditions.
- Offer individuals the opportunity for financial assistance to assist with the cost of coverage.

For more information or to pre-register, please call 336-718-7000. This free event is open to the public and interpreters will be available. Visit www.NovantHealth.org/healthexchange for more information about the Marketplace and for a list of reputable resources.

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dents to teach them the skills they don't learn in the classroom. JA's volunteer-delivered programs inspire young people to succeed in a global

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