

April 14, 2021

Westmoreland County Board of Elections

Primary Election of May 18, 2021

A meeting of the Westmoreland County Board of Elections met on Wednesday, April 14, 2021 at the Westmoreland County Courthouse, Commissioners Meeting Room #101, Greensburg, PA. The following were present: Commissioners Sean Kertes, Douglas W. Chew, Gina Cerilli, Esq., County Solicitor Melissa A. Guiddy and Election Director JoAnn Sebastiani. The following business was conducted:

Mr. Kertes called the meeting to order at 9:30am

Motion was made by Mr. Chew, seconded by Ms. Cerilli and it was unanimously agreed to approve the minutes of the Election Board held March 19, 2021, as presented

Opportunity for Public Comment

David Paris, Greensburg - drop boxes, don't know what you are considering; but if it isn't broke, don't fix it; if you are looking to pull boxes or restrict them, he doesn't see the reason; he said that he doesn't see a problem to that as the solution. He states that previous election was fair/clean/free and he doesn't see any reason to change what works; he is in favor of the current process

the following public comment was received via email:

*Michael Pardus- I'm a volunteer with the Voice of Westmorland. I'm calling on our county commissioner to protect and expand the use of mail-in ballot drop boxes in our county. The 2020 election showed that drop boxes are a safe and secure way for voters to submit their mail-in ballots and their use should not be limited. Mail-in ballots and the use of drop boxes do not favor either the republican or democratic party. Free and fair elections depend on the ability of all voters to exercise their democratic right to vote. Thirty-five states, including Pennsylvania, have no-excuse absentee ballots. Thirty-eight states, including Pennsylvania, allow the use of drop boxes. States allowing no-excuse absentee ballots and drop boxes are nearly evenly split between red, blue and purple states. Contrary to popular belief, multiple studies have shown that neither party has an advantage due to mail in balloting (e.g., *The Neutral Partisan Effects of Vote-by-Mail: Evidence from County-Level Roll-Outs*, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, April 2020). Access to drop boxes provides the voter greater control of their mail-in ballot. Drop boxes guarantee timely delivery of mail-in ballots rather than relying on the Postal Service. As you also know, the Greensburg Post Office was delinquent in delivery of mail-in ballots on election day ("County elections officials still must make a final determination on the status of 375 ballots delivered to the courthouse by the U.S. Postal Service nine minutes late on election night" TribLive, November 10, 2021). These ballots would have been rejected but for the intervention of the court. Ballots cast using drop boxes experienced no such threat to the voters' exercise of their democratic rights. The use of drop boxes by the electorate will increase over time. Arguments against mail-in ballot drop boxes in Westmoreland County including under-use and cost are only a convenient excuse for voter repression. No excuse mail in balloting and the use of drop boxes is new in Pennsylvania and some challenges were inevitable. This was exacerbated by poor messaging on drop boxes by the Secretary of State and the county Election Bureau. Consistent, regular, and very public voter outreach by the commissioners and Election Bureau is required. We demand that you expand the use of drop boxes to more locations and for longer durations during county elections. To do otherwise is a disservice to all county voters regardless of political affiliation.*

Kathryn Emery -As a person with a physical disability, I can not stand on a line to wait to vote. The drop boxes used in the 2020 election was a god send. These boxes are crucial for so many people. The underserved communities with no transportation, the elderly that depend on other people to drive them, and people in rural areas. And then people like me who can not stand up for long periods of time. The removal of these boxes is voter suppression plain and simple. I respectfully demand that Commissioner Chew fight to keep these boxes in our county! As a volunteer for voice of Westmoreland, we worked hard to get these drop boxes. Please do not take them away!

*Susan Witt - Reducing access to mail-in ballot drop boxes is voter suppression. I'm a volunteer with the Voice of Westmorland. I'm calling on our county commissioners to protect and expand the use of mail-in ballot drop boxes in our county. The 2020 election showed that drop boxes are a safe and secure way for voters to submit their mail-in ballots and their use should not be limited. Mail-in ballots and the use of drop boxes do not favor either the republican or democratic party. Free and fair elections depend on the ability of all voters to exercise their democratic right to vote. Thirty-five states, including Pennsylvania, have no-excuse absentee ballots. Thirty-eight states, including Pennsylvania, allow the use of drop boxes. States allowing no-excuse absentee ballots and drop boxes are nearly evenly split between red, blue and purple states. Contrary to popular belief, multiple studies have shown that neither party has an advantage due to mail in balloting (e.g., *The Neutral Partisan Effects of Vote-by-Mail: Evidence from County-Level Roll-Outs*, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, April 2020). Access to drop boxes provides the voter greater control of their mail-in ballot. Drop boxes guarantee timely delivery of mail-in ballots rather than relying on the Postal Service. As you also know, the Greensburg Post Office was delinquent in delivery of mail-in ballots on election day ("County elections officials still must make a final determination on the status of 375 ballots delivered to the courthouse by the U.S. Postal Service nine minutes late on election night" TribLive, November 10, 2020). These ballots would have been rejected but for the intervention of the court. Ballots cast using drop boxes experienced no such threat to the voters' exercise of their democratic rights. The use of drop boxes by the electorate will increase over time. Arguments against mail-in ballot drop boxes in Westmoreland County including under-use and cost are only a convenient excuse for voter repression. No excuse mail in balloting and the use of drop boxes is new in Pennsylvania and some challenges were inevitable. This was exacerbated by poor messaging on drop boxes by the Secretary of State and the county Election Bureau. Consistent, regular, and very public voter outreach by the commissioners and Election Bureau is required. Lastly, I am a Westmoreland County poll worker, and last year I also volunteered on the provisional board. As a poll worker, I have used absentee/mail-in ballots every year because I do not work at my home precinct. Last year, with the late arrival of our ballots due to unforeseen complications with the company responsible for mailing them out, I felt more secure using the drop box rather than the U.S. mail to ensure my ballot was received before the election. In addition, I took part in a text bank to voters weeks prior to the election, to inform voters about the drop box locations. During those weeks many voters were stressed about the lateness of their ballots and were concerned about them being received at the election bureau on time. I was able to direct them to the drop box nearest them to help them feel more confident that their votes would be counted. We have a large older population of voters in our county that appreciated the convenience of being able to deliver their ballots, as well as, a large population of workers who work out of the county on a daily and weekly basis. I personally spent some time at the Monessen drop box on the day it was located at the Adult Probation Office and everyone who arrived was happy and appreciative that they were able to leave their ballots in the drop box. Mail-in balloting and Drop boxes made it easier for these voters to vote without health risk, while avoiding long lines or needless worry about the failure of the Post Office to deliver their ballots to the courthouse before election day. I believe that as people become more aware of the drop boxes and get used to being able to use them, this system will no longer be under-used. This is 2021 and we should be making it easier to vote and not more difficult. We demand that you expand the use of drop boxes to more locations and for longer durations during county elections. To do otherwise is a disservice to all county voters regardless of political affiliation.*

Suzanne Wilcox English, Greensburg - a constituent of yours and a volunteer with Voice of Westmoreland, a nonpartisan group that works for more representative government in our county. With mail-in balloting on the increase in 2020, we worked to ensure that more drop boxes were provided to ensure safe and secure voting for those at risk, as well as those who do not have easy access to the courthouse. We appreciate your approving that increase to six drop boxes throughout the county. The changes made throughout our nation helped to increase voter participation to more than 60%, a substantial increase but still far below many other countries. Many developed countries such as Sweden, Japan, Germany and others range in the 70%-90% range, while prior to 2016 we ranked with Slovenia, Estonia and Latvia at just over 55%. In Westmoreland County, our COVID case numbers continue to be extremely high, and mail-in voting remains a safe way to cast our ballots. Importantly, it also provides greater access to those in rural and underserved communities. Drop boxes also provide timely delivery of ballots, rather than relying on our now-uncertain Postal Service. It is important that you use your positions to serve those most in need, and maintain this improvement in our voting access. Please expand the use of drop boxes to ensure that all who wish to vote are able to do so.

Diana Gray, and I am a tax-paying resident of North Huntingdon. I am also an elderly widow with mobility issues. During the 2020 elections I was fortunate to be able to vote by mail-in ballot as I would not have been physically able to stand in line at my polling place. However, with the uncertainty of the US Postal Service's ability to deliver my ballot on time, I was able to deposit it in a drop box from the safety of my car. Drop boxes proved to be a safe and efficient way for people like me to be able to vote. As the elderly population of Westmoreland County continues to grow, there will be a greater need for accessibility to drop boxes as well as mail-in ballots. I understand there is a desire to reduce drop boxes to only one, which would be located inside the lobby of the Courthouse. That location presents a hardship to anyone who has difficulty parking and walking any distance, and would disenfranchise a growing number of voters. This makes me wonder why you would want to make it more difficult for county residents to vote. The use of mail-in ballots and drop boxes are a non-partisan way to encourage more people to participate in the democratic process upon which this nation was founded. In conclusion, I believe accessibility to mail-in ballots and drop boxes is absolutely necessary to be maintained at the level provided during 2020, if not increased. Any action counter to this will be recognized by voters as an attempt to disenfranchise those of us who are elderly and/or physically disabled.

Bob Mason-have been a resident of Westmoreland County since 1988 where my wife and I have raised our family and contributed to our community. One example is our membership in Voice of Westmoreland. Democracy and support for the welfare of all our residents regardless of gender, income, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity are cornerstones for building an inclusive and thriving county. I am calling on our commissioners to protect and actually expand the use of mail-in ballots drop boxes to ensure that everyone has the greatest opportunity to cast their vote in a manner that is safe and secure. The facts of the 2020 election showed that drop boxes are safe and secure. In fact there is no evidence to support claims of widespread election fraud during many elections throughout the United States. Mail-in ballots do not tip the election in favor of Republicans or Democrats. Making voting easier, especially for those who have difficulty taking time off from work and family responsibilities enhances democracy. Anything making voting more difficult suppresses democracy.

Mary Kay Nafaa - I'm a resident of North Huntingdon and a volunteer with the Voice of Westmoreland. I'm calling on both Commissioners Kertes and Chew to protect and expand the use of ballot drop boxes in our county. The November 2020 election showed drop boxes to be an effective, safe and secure way for voters to submit their mail-in ballots. Ballot drop boxes provide greater access to voters in rural and underserved communities, those that can't get to the courthouse, and provide the voter greater control of their mail-in ballot. Access to drop boxes also provides assured and timely delivery of mail-in ballots rather than relying on the Postal Service. The offering of one drop box at the courthouse is no offer at all. For folks with ambulation issues, the walk into the court house is too far. For folks on the outskirts of our county the time and money to drive to the courthouse is prohibitive. For those, unaware they will need to go through metal detectors to submit a ballot, it becomes a barrier. For anyone wanting to come to the courthouse to drop off their ballot, the Bureau of Elections office is only a few steps off the lobby. For all these reasons, an offer of one drop box in the courthouse is no offer at all. Reducing access to ballot drop boxes constitutes voter suppression. We need you, Commissioners, Kertes and Chew to protect our voting rights. I ask you to expand the use of drop boxes to more locations and for a longer duration for all elections. The first line of an email from Commissioner Chew I received on 3/26/2021, stated, "Can you show me where I spoke AGAINST drop boxes?", my response is, show me that you are for drop boxes! Please do not be puppets for your political party, supporting voter suppression as a political tool. You should be defenders of democracy, not its road block.

Joanne Hall - I would like to comment on elections in Westmoreland County and how I feel they can be improved. I like no excuse mail in ballots, have used them in the last two elections, and will continue to vote by mail. It is easy, convenient and allows for greater public participation in the democratic process. No excuse mail in ballots should continue, be accessible to all county residents, and expanded to include drop boxes throughout the county. I used a drop box for my November, 2020 ballot at the Westmoreland County Community College. It was a short drive from my home, parking was easy and free, and it took a short amount of time to deliver my ballot. Drop boxes should be used more widely in the county to increase voter participation. Having only one drop box at the county courthouse is very inconvenient due to parking issues, security checks at the entrance and can be difficult to access if you have a disability. Rural voters who want to drop off ballots may have to drive long distances to Greensburg and this can discourage participation. Drop boxes should be placed through out the county to accommodate all voters, should have varied hours and days to work with the busy schedules of voters, and provide confidence in the democratic process. I hope you will consider this as a public comment related to the election board meeting. I did not want to attend in person due to the pandemic, but want my voice to be heard concerning this matter. There should have been a Zoom option for the meeting so more residents could comment in person. Please consider that for future meetings.

Diana Steck and I have been a Westmoreland county resident for all of my 66 years. I live in North Huntingdon where my husband and I have raised our family. I have been involved in projects and endeavors to enhance grassroots democratic values and improve health and welfare in our county for many years. I am a member of Voice of Westmoreland because this organization believes that everyone has a voice, not just the powerful few. No matter what you look like, where you are from, who you love or how you worship, we ALL deserve the right to cast our vote in free and secure elections. I am submitting public comments today because as the primary election season nears, I am concerned about the safety and security of our mail in ballots. In 2020, voting by mail provided more people, of both parties, greater access to cast their votes. No validated evidence of fraud or election tampering was seen. I am calling upon you commissioners as part of the Election Board for Westmoreland County to work to not only protect but enhance voting by mail and the use of drop boxes. We remain in the midst of a pandemic and many have yet to be vaccinated. Voting by mail ensures our safety and health, now more than ever. I applaud the county for utilizing drop boxes in the 2020 election. At this time, I feel that we need to EXPAND the use and locations of drop boxes in the county. USPS delays are unpredictable. Drop boxes guarantee timely delivery of ballots. Drop boxes can be located in rural and underserved areas of the county to facilitate the voting process. Use of drop boxes ensures that mail in ballots are received and counted in a timely manner. Voting by mail helps to make the voting process easier and the use of drop boxes should not be limited. Thirty eight states, including Pennsylvania allow mail in voting and the use of drop boxes and in none of these states did drop box use favor one party over another. Plain and simple-drop boxes enhance the voting process! I feel that expanding the use of drop boxes to more locations and for longer durations during county elections is needed to expand our voting ability. For you as Commissioners and the County Election Board to try to limit or restrict drop box use constitutes voter suppression. Please take a non partisan stand to enhance voting rights in our county. Expand the use of drop boxes and protect the no excuse mail in ballots. Free and fair elections depend upon the ability of all voters to exercise their democratic right to vote. No excuse mail in ballots and expanded drop box use protects our democracy.

Patricia Oliver, North Huntingdon Township- I have 3 questions for Commissioner Chew Have you attempted to analyze, review other states, such as Utah and Colorado that have successfully and safely offered the mail-in ballot to their voters? Drop boxes offer a safe option of delivery for the ballots, but the courthouse is not easily accessed for many voters due to parking issues and location. Why not the municipal buildings in North Huntingdon and surrounding areas? The mail-in ballot application that should have been sent out to all the voters requesting them by checking the box, was not. 3 of my neighbors did not receive them. One friend who did receive it found it confusing. The application was not on the front but the back. And the wording "permanent voter status" is misleading. Why not just have the application on the front and a simple "if you don't want an application to have a mail-in ballot sent to you check here. Voters should have the option to vote by mail or vote in person. Voting is a right and should be encouraged to protect our democracy.

Motion was made by Ms. Cerilli to keep the same plan as 2020 for drop boxes and locations throughout Westmoreland County, with specific locations, dates, times and employees approved at a later date; there is no second on the motion; Motion fails

Upon review and recommendation of JoAnn Sebastiani, Director motion was made by Mr. Chew, seconded by Ms. Cerilli and it was unanimously agreed approve the following:

- 1) Election Bureau Staff to do the Official Count for the May 18, 2021 Municipal Primary Election commencing May 21, 2021

- 2) Election Bureau Staff and those employees temporarily assigned to the Election Bureau to the Mail-In & Absentee board to do the Pre-Canvassing for the May 18, 2021 Municipal Primary Election to convene on May 18, 2021 at 7:00 AM.

There being no further business, motion was made by Mr. Chew, seconded by Ms. Cerilli and it was unanimously agreed to adjourn the meeting at 9:55am