

RE: HB 1171 & 1198 Relating to Polling Locations

Mr. Chair and committee members, I'm Donnell Preskey Hushka with the North Dakota Association of Counties. In my role at NDACo, I serve as executive director of the North Dakota County Auditors Association. We stand in opposition to this bill only because, in critical emergency situations, someone needs to have the authority to respond.

My testimony today is to provide you some background on why this bill is here. There are three bills heard this week that get to the same issue, restricting the Governor's authority relating to polling locations. This stems from executive orders made during the COVID-19 pandemic related to elections. The North Dakota County Auditors Association was in communication with the Governor's office and made requests for the Governor to use his emergency powers prior to the June election and prior to the general election.

It's important to understand the election timeline in relation to when COVID-19 pandemic hit to help explain the reasons for the county Auditors' requests.

March 13th – Governor Burgum declares state of emergency for COVID-19.

March 24th – ND County Auditors sent letter to Governor requesting the following:

- Waive requirements for 1 physical polling location for June election.
- 2020 Primary be mail ballot only.
- Increase time to process mail/absentee ballots from 2 to 5 days.

March 26th - Governor signed Executive Order which:

- Strongly encouraged county commissions to:
 - o Approve and authorize voting by mail ballot "absentee ballot".
 - o Establish secure mail ballot drop box locations.
- The Executive Order also:
 - o Suspended the requirement for counties to have one polling location; allowing county commissions to utilize all vote by mail ballots.
 - o Suspended requirement to establish polling places no later than 64th day before the election.
 - o Allow for processing absentee ballots 5 days prior to election.
 - o Required applications for ballots to be sent to all voters in state's central voter file.
 - o Provide an assistive ballot marking device 40 days prior to election through election day.

Auditors have deadlines to follow in election preparations, which was the reason for the urgency in making the request to move to all vote by mail in June.

April 6th (64 days before election) – deadline for setting polling locations.

April 6th - filing deadline for candidates.

April 6th – deadline to upload ballot information for election programming.

April 20-30th – Applications for ballots need to be mailed.

County commissioners in all 53 counties passed resolutions to go all vote by mail due to the pandemic.

To summarize, when the COVID-19 emergency was declared in North Dakota, the state shut down – schools closed, workplaces adjusted by having employees work from home if able, businesses and most county courthouses were restricted or closed. County auditors had to make quick decisions on how to plan for the June election during this time of great uncertainty. Election deadlines were quickly approaching, and auditors were faced with venues typically used as polling locations being closed, gatherings were restricted, and poll workers were impossible to hire. In addition, personal protection equipment was almost impossible to find. Imagine, faced with all that, planning and holding an in-person election.

We recognize that the situation improved about 3 weeks prior to the June election when we saw businesses start to re-open. However, that was not enough time for counties to make a switch to offer an in-person voting location.

We have never experienced an emergency that has affected the entire state like this. If the legislature wants to restrict the Governor's authority to respond in dire emergency situations, then the power needs to lie with our local elected officials, in this case our county commissioners. In an emergency, in the most urgent situation, someone needs to have the power to make the necessary adjustments.

For the November Election, every county had at least one voting location open. Auditors had the time to prepare for holding an election during a pandemic and were able to purchase PPE to provide a safe voting environment for citizens who wanted to vote in person.

Under incredibly difficult circumstance, the State and Counties worked to ensure citizens' constitutional right to vote was honored in a secure and safe manner.