



CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

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Rick Becksted
Mayor

May 20, 2020

Chair Melanie Levesque
Senate Election Law and Municipal Affairs Committee
107 North Main Street
Concord, NH 03301

Chair David Cote
House Election Law Committee
107 North Maine Street
Concord, NH 03301

Chair Bradley Cook
Select Committee on 2020 Emergency Election Support
c/o William M. Gardner, Secretary of State
The State House, Room 204
Concord, NH 03301

RE: City of Portsmouth's Testimony encouraging citizens to vote and to support eliminating barriers to voting

Chairs Levesque, Cote and Cook:

The Mayor and City Council of Portsmouth would first like to thank all of you for your past, present and future work in ensuring that the State of New Hampshire has safe and fair elections. The City of Portsmouth has adopted Legislative Principles that encourage citizens to vote and support eliminating barriers to voting. In light of the unprecedented challenges that Covid-19 poses to our federal elections this fall, we present this letter as general testimony in support of all pending legislation that supports these Legislative Principles. This letter also serves as testimony in support of any recommendations made by the Select Committee to the Department of State that will provide financial assistance to the City to address unforeseen election costs and new safety protocols needed to protect the health and safety of all those who vote and work in the next election.

We understand that the House and Senate are unable to meet due to the current State of Emergency and the present status of pending legislation on voter registration and absentee ballots is unknown. If legislative committee meetings are to resume, the City provides testimony in support of the following bills:

House bills.

HB 556- Is a bill that would allow municipalities to process absentee ballots prior to election day. This bill has been referred to interim study. However, the ability to allow municipalities to process absentee ballots prior to election day is an issue that has been addressed by the testimony of city and town clerks before the Select Committee. The Secretary of State's recent memorandum on absentee ballots provides that citizens may use the disability justification for absentee ballots. This will create a substantial increase in the use of absentee ballots at the next election. The City supports the use of absentee ballots because it makes it easier and safer for voters to participate in the election. The current law (RSA 659:49-55) provides that absentee ballots can only be processed two hours after the polls open. Processing absentee ballots is very labor intensive during a regular election but given the substantial increase anticipated in the use of absentee ballots at the next election, the Select Committee could recommend to the Governor that an Emergency Order, or to the Legislature if it is back in session, to temporarily suspend the law as it is currently written to permit processing absentee ballots in advance of the election to allow sufficient time to process ballots and protect the health and safety of voters and poll workers.

Absentee ballots are also addressed in HB 1672- A bill that would allow "no excuse" absentee ballots. This bill passed the House and should be headed to the Senate. Some voters are not comfortable listing reasons for the need for an absentee ballot. This bill would remove the requirement to list a reason for voting absentee and as such, the City supports this bill because it encourage citizens to vote and remove barriers to voting.

Senate bills.

SB 631- Is a bill that would support online voter registration with technological security measures to be established by the Secretary of State. SB 7 would permit voter registration by motor vehicle registration through the Secure Modern Accurate Registration Technology Act (SMART ACT). As we have seen with the Covid-19 pandemic, online access and technological means of connecting and accessing information has been necessary for government to function. As much as we are learning about Covid-19 as the days and months pass, there is so much we do not know. Covid-19's impact will be felt for months, if not years to come. The City supports SB 631 and SB 7 because the ability to register to vote online, or through motor vehicle registration with appropriate security measures, supports the City's Legislative Principle of encouraging citizens to vote and removing barriers to voting.

The Select Committee will make recommendations to the Department of State on how the \$3.2 million In CARE Act funds will be paid to municipalities to prepare for and respond to Covid-19 for the 2020 federal elections. These funds may be used for various Covid-19 related election costs, including but not limited to costs associated with changes to and support of the voting process, equipment and supplies, staffing needs, security and training and communication. All municipalities will need these funds to ensure a fair and safe election for voters and workers. No two municipalities needs will be identical, so the City encourages the Select Committee to permit municipalities the flexible financial assistance they need to create new procedures to address the challenges that Covid-19 presents and to ensure the safety of all involved in the next election.

"We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate." Thomas Jefferson. Thank you for distributing the City's testimony to your respective Committees and for your hard work in helping all New Hampshire voters participate in the upcoming election during these most difficult times.

Sincerely,



Mayor Becksted and the Portsmouth City Council

c: The Honorable Christopher Sununu
William M. Gardner, Secretary of State
House Majority Leader Doug Ley
Senate Majority Leader Dan Feltes
Portsmouth Legislative Delegation
Senator Tom Sherman
City Council Members
Karen Conard, City Manager