

Takoma Park Board of Elections
Statement on November 3, 2020 Election Planning

June 17, 2020

Dear Members of the Council,

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States, the Takoma Park Board of Elections (BOE or the Board) has been monitoring the situation and its potential impact for the conduct of the 2020 city elections. The Board has been meeting regularly during this period to discuss the different scenarios for holding an election during COVID-19.

During its most recent meeting on Thursday, June 11, 2020, the board unanimously decided to recommend that the city move to an all vote-by-mail election in November. During an all vote-by-mail election, the City would mail every registered voter a ballot. Voters would complete the ballot at home and drop it off at predetermined points or mail it back to the city. Voters would not need to request a ballot to be sent to them. On Election Day, in-person voting would be available on a limited basis to accommodate same day registration and other special circumstances.

The Board decided upon this recommendation primarily to ensure the safety of election workers and voters, and determined that the required preparation timelines necessitate a decision early in the year. Key reasons for the Board's recommendation are as follows:

- **Election worker safety:** Public health guidelines indicate that prolonged time in indoor spaces with large numbers of people are high risk factors for transmission. Though voters, with appropriate social distancing, may be able to quickly move through the polling site, election workers would spend up to 13 hours in the same indoor space shared with hundreds of individuals.
- **Voter safety:** Despite their short interactions, voters would still be required to interact with multiple materials and indoor spaces with the public, including standing in a second line for Takoma Park's parallel election with the state.
- **Election worker recruitment:** The city needed to recruit an even higher number of workers this year due to the increase from one to five polling places. However, the Board would be concerned that few workers would be willing to volunteer given the risks involved.
- **Turnout:** Given that most voters would go through the county polling site first, and then proceed to Takoma Park's election, the Board anticipates that many voters may decide to only risk the county election process if they vote in person.

- **Charter and code timelines:** A change to vote-by-mail could require a change in the city code and the city charter. In particular, the Board notes that the current City Charter requires that the results be certified within 48 hours of Election Day. With this requirement, all mailed ballots must be *received* by Election Day so that they can be counted. The Board would prefer to allow ballots to be *postmarked* by Election Day. The Board notes that the most recent primary election in Maryland allowed for ballots to be postmarked on Election Day.
- **Procurement timelines:** Due to high demand on direct mail vendors for elections, the City would benefit from early outreach to vendors to secure a provider for printing and mailing ballots to each resident.
- **Voter education and publicity:** The Board was planning a voter outreach and education effort to inform residents that the election would be held side-by-side with the state and federal elections. Deciding on the election approach before publicity efforts begin will avoid mixed messaging about the election.

The Board will coordinate with the Montgomery County Board of Elections and the State of Maryland where possible. We look forward to receiving feedback from the Council.

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