



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 4, 2015

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: MARK B. JINKS, ACTING CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Introduction and First Reading. Consideration. Passage on First Reading of an Ordinance to Replace St. James Church with the Hermitage Polling Place and to Add the Charles Houston Center as a New Polling Place with Associated Changes in the Durant Center and Fire Department Headquarters Precinct Boundaries.

ISSUE: Consideration of an ordinance to replace St. James Church with the Hermitage Polling Place and add the Charles Houston Center as a new polling place with associated changes in the Durant Center and Fire Department Headquarters precinct boundaries.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council pass on first reading and set for public hearing, second reading and final passage on March 14, 2015 an ordinance (Attachment 1) to replace Saint James Church with the Hermitage Polling Place and add the Charles Houston Center as a new polling place with associated changes in the Durant Center and Fire Department Headquarters precinct boundaries.

BACKGROUND: The Alexandria Electoral Board, which is comprised of three bipartisan members who are appointed by the Alexandria Circuit Court for staggered three year terms, is responsible for making recommendations to City Council concerning changes in precinct boundaries and the establishment of new precincts. City Council has the statutory authority to make these changes. In making its recommendations to Council, the Electoral Board is primarily concerned with ensuring that precincts conform to legal requirements, are a manageable size, have suitable voting facilities and are fully accessible. The Electoral Board monitors any changes in the availability of polling place facilities and also considers the current number of registered voters, in-person turnout statistics, the size of the voting facility and any likely residential development within the precinct.

The Electoral Board has determined that a polling place is needed to replace St. James Church because this facility is being redeveloped and will no longer be available for use as a polling place. The Board has also determined that a new precinct is needed to accommodate continuing growth in the Fire Department Headquarters and Durant Center precincts.

DISCUSSION: On February 6, 2015, the Alexandria Electoral Board voted to recommend that City Council make the following two changes to the City's polling places and precinct boundaries effective with the June 9, 2015 Primary Election.

- The Hermitage (5000 Fairbanks Avenue) would replace St. James Church (5000 Echols Avenue) with no change to precinct boundaries.
 - As a result of redevelopment, St. James will no longer be available as a polling place, and the Electoral Board has secured permission to return to the Hermitage, which has served as a polling place in the past.
 - According to State law (§ 24.2-310.1 of the Code of Virginia), polling places are to be located in public buildings whenever practical, however, no public facility was available in this precinct, and no changes are possible to the precinct boundaries without splitting either a School Board District or State Senate District.
 - Charles Houston Recreation Center (901 Wythe Street) would be added as a new precinct and polling place by adjusting the boundaries for the Fire Department Headquarters (900 Second Street) and Durant Center (1605 Cameron Street) precincts. A new precinct in this area is critical to accommodate current voters and absorb future growth resulting from new development near the Braddock Metro, and redevelopment of several existing properties.
 - As shown on the attached maps (Attachment 2 and 3) and list of citywide registration counts (Attachment 4), these boundary changes will result in the following transfers of voters:
 - 1548 active voters will be moved from Fire Department Headquarters to Charles Houston.
 - 886 active voters will be moved from Durant Center to Charles Houston.
 - These changes will not affect the City's School Board boundaries or the proposed State House or Senate boundaries nor will they split any census blocks. In addition, the recommended adjustments to precinct lines follow "clearly observable boundaries" (in this case - named streets) as required by State law
- (§ 24.2-305 of the Code of Virginia).
- More voters were moved from the Fire Department precinct than from the Durant precinct as a result of the voting space within these two facilities. Durant is able to easily accommodate large numbers of voters, while the Fire Department is not.
 - Fire Department staff has been very accommodating to voters and election officers, and many voters enjoy visiting the Fire Department on Election Day, however, the shape of the polling facility is problematic, especially in larger elections. Voting takes place in a truck bay, which is a very long and narrow space and difficult to arrange for voting.
 - The Fire Department remains a working fire station on Election Day, so fire alarms and truck sirens can make it difficult to hear voters and election officers, especially when the

polling place is crowded with voters.

TIMING OF THE CHANGES: The Electoral Board recommends that Council make these polling place changes effective with the June 9, 2015, Democratic Primary Election instead of waiting to make the changes effective with the November 3, 2015, General Election because the Primary Election will have a smaller turnout and there will be less confusion for voters and election officers. In addition, this will provide a greater opportunity for voters and election officers to adjust to the new polling places and precinct boundaries prior to the Presidential Election. There is also less confusion when the same polling places are used for the Primary Election and General Election.

If City Council approves this ordinance, the Electoral Board will send notification by first class mail to all affected voters prior to the June 9, 2015 Primary Election. Although only one notice is legally required, staff recommends that a second notice be sent to voters prior to the November 3, 2015 General Election as an added measure to ensure that voters are aware of the precinct changes. In addition, the Electoral Board will work with the City's Communications

OUTREACH AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: Before bringing its recommendations to Council, the Electoral Board solicited input from stakeholders, including neighborhood associations and community organizations, and invited them to attend a public meeting on February 4 in which the precinct plans were discussed (see Attachment 5 for a list of the invited groups). Details of the proposals have been posted on the City's web site, and information was shared via press releases. The feedback from the public has been favorable and the Board has received overall support for its proposal. There have been a few technical questions and several citizens expressed concern about the number of voters that were moved from the Fire Department Headquarters precinct to the new Charles Houston precinct. In response to these concerns, the Board adjusted its recommendation to reduce the number of voters that would be moved from the Fire Department Headquarters to the new Charles Houston polling place. These adjustments are already reflected in the attached maps.

FUTURE CHANGES IN POLLING PLACES: The Electoral Board continually monitors polling places to ensure that they adequately support the voting process. The following is a summary of changes in polling places that could occur in the future:

- 1. Chinquapin Recreation Center** - The Electoral Board has determined that it may be necessary to move from Chinquapin because of parking limitations, congestion and space limitations at this facility, as well as a renovation project that could be planned for Chinquapin. These issues make the voting process more difficult, particularly for large elections. Initially, the Board planned to schedule this change for June 2015 and considered Minnie Howard School and T.C. Williams as potential alternatives. The Board included the potential move from Chinquapin in the February 4, 2015, Public Hearing and received public input supporting a move from Chinquapin, however, there are issues with both Minnie Howard and T.C. Williams, so the Board needs to explore other facilities.
- 2. Potomac Yard** - The Board anticipates that a new polling place will be needed in 2016 or 2017 to accommodate growth in the Potomac Yard section of the City and to reduce the size of the Mount Vernon, Cora Kelly and George Washington Precincts. The Board has inspected the new Fire Department in this section of the City and it appears that this facility could be used as a polling place. The Board and its staff will closely monitor the growth in Potomac Yard and will return to Council to recommend a new polling place in this area in the future.
- 3. West End** - The City has several polling places in the West End with a large number of registered voters and it could prove beneficial to reduce the size of these precincts if another facility could be used as a

polling place, however, the Board and its staff have searched for an accessible facility that could be used as a new polling place in the West End and have been unable to locate a suitable facility. The Board will continue to monitor growth in the West End and may recommend the addition of a polling place in the future.

FISCAL IMPACT: No additional voting equipment is required, however, it will cost approximately \$6,750 to send two notifications to all the affected voters and prepare precinct maps and other materials announcing these changes. This amount will be split between the FY15 and FY16 budget years and can be accommodated within the budget for the Office of Voter Registration and Elections.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Cover Sheet
2. Proposed Ordinance
3. Map of Proposed Boundary Changes (detail)
4. Map of Proposed Boundary Changes (overview)
5. Groups Contacted in Public Outreach
6. Citywide Voter Registration Counts

STAFF:

Members of the Alexandria Electoral Board

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