

LENA C. TAYLOR

Wisconsin State Senator • 4th District

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Senate Committee on Shared Revenue, Elections and Consumer Protection

SB 366 - Senator Lena C. Taylor Testimony

11/8/2023

Chairman Knodl, Vice Chairman Feyen and members of the Senate Committee on Shared Revenue, Elections and Consumer Protection, thank you for holding a Public Hearing on Senate Bill 366, relating to polling place closures.

As a result of a nationwide health pandemic, we knew Wisconsin's Spring 2020 election was going to be a challenge. As concisely reported by the Brennan Center for Justice, the weeks leading up to the Wisconsin primary election on April 7 were tumultuous.

On March 27, Gov. Evers called for every voter in the state to be sent an absentee ballot, but the Republican-controlled legislature rejected the idea. The weekend before the election, Evers called an emergency session of the legislature, hoping to postpone the election; once again, he was unsuccessful.

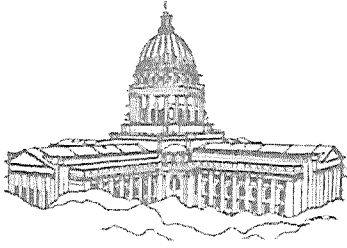
Worried about the staggering loss of poll workers, due to fears of the spread of COVID-19, the Governor and local election officials were rightfully concerned about the ability to carry out local elections. Evers even tried to move the date of the election to June 9th, but the Supreme Court struck down his order. Assessing what was within his power, Governor Evers offered up the use of the Wisconsin National Guard to help municipalities execute local elections.

However, during the Spring 2020 election, many Milwaukee voters went to their polling locations to find nearly 97% of them closed. In the rest of the state, the number of polling places dropped by an average of 11 percent. Right here in Madison, a city of roughly 250,000, 66 of its normal 92 **polling centers** were open during the Spring 2020 election. In Milwaukee, a city of more than a half million people, we had just five open polling locations.

Again, it was the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and we were under a state of emergency. According to a Milwaukee County website, at the time, 112 Wisconsinites had died from COVID-19 or related causes. Milwaukee County was hit particularly hard and suffered 68 of those deaths. Some 1200 confirmed cases were in the city. We were in uncharted territory.

In the midst of the crisis, there were mistakes and missteps made. Particularly, when it came to the mass closing of polling locations, in the state's largest city.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed inconsistencies in our procedures across municipalities. Questions regarding polling locations arose across the state. Who has the authority to close a polling location? What number of polling sites can be closed or impacted? When and how must



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voters be notified regarding polling location closures? Where can you relocate a polling location? Why do you need to close or change a polling location? Oftentimes, the answers were rooted in public safety and health concerns, but not grounded in law.

The result? Disenfranchised voters. After a review of the 2020 Wisconsin election, the Brennan Center found that polling place consolidation reduced voter turnout by nearly 9%, and that Black voter turnout was especially depressed from these closures.

SB 366 a first step to guarantee that no matter what part of the state you vote in, the treatment, access and ability to participate fairly in elections, will be the same. We can never again see a time when voters show up to their regular polling locations, only to find the doors locked and no real information on where they should go to cast a ballot.

We need to root out all forms of voter suppression, whether deliberate or unintentional.

There had to be a response to the concerns raised by Wisconsin residents, who felt marginalized in the 2020 electoral process.

I remember the frustrated and angry residents, who waited in line for hours to vote. I promised not to forget the number of people who were turned away at polling locations and redirected across town. I carry with me the defeated voters, who threw their hands up in frustration, when they realized that because of the outrageous number of polling location closures, poor notification of the changes, and other election problems, they would miss the opportunity to vote.

SB 366 is a down-payment on my promise to fix what happened to them. I hope you will join me by supporting this bill and ensuring that this never happens again to any Wisconsin voter. Thank you.



SHAE SORTWELL

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 2nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Hearing Testimony
Senate Committee on Shared Revenue, Elections, and Consumer Protection
November 8, 2023
Senate Bill 366

Chairman Knodl and members of the Senate Committee on Shared Revenue, Elections, and Consumer Protection – thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on SB 366, relating to polling place closures.

There have been multiple attempts by city executives, notably in the city of Milwaukee, to close polling locations last minute. Unprecedented long lines and the lack of efficient public notice caused many voters to not bother turning in a ballot or not make it to their proper polling location on time.

SB 366 protects people’s right to vote by creating a more accountable system when a municipality seeks to close a polling location(s).

Under this bill, a municipality may close no more than 50% of its polling locations unless voted on by its legislative body more than 30 days prior to an election and after a public hearing on the proposed discontinuation. Within 30 days before an election, a polling location may only close with the approval of both the head of the municipality’s legislative body and the municipal clerk. If any closures occur, the municipality is required to provide proper notice to the public in accordance with public notice law.

In the event a polling location closes, the public will at least be better notified under this bill. And so, potential voters will be better prepared to go to their proper polling location and submit their vote on time.

Finally, I will note that Senator Taylor and I have introduced a couple of amendments in the Assembly for this legislation that would clarify poll workers still have emergency authority to close a location and prohibit first class cities from closing a polling location within 30 days of an election unless a majority of the elected members of the legislative body and the municipal clerk votes to approve.

I want to thank the committee for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions members of the committee may have.