

To: Government Accountability Board
Date: August 2, 2011
From: Paul Malischke and Tanya Lohr

Subject: Agenda Item H, Legislation – SB-116

Please help protect Wisconsin voters from polling place re-locations that are made too close to an election and without adequate notice.

Under current law (statute 5.25 (3)), the governing body of a municipality must establish polling places for a fall election 60 days before the election.

Senate bill 116 has passed the Senate and been referred to an Assembly Committee. It would weaken voter protection by allowing a polling place location to be changed up to 30 days before an election. We are submitting evidence that this is not sufficient.

For a recent election, Glendale closed four polling places, with a decision 29 days before the election. Acting on their own, a group of dedicated citizens took shifts at the closed locations, and guided voters to the correct location. They tallied 505 voters that appeared at **closed** polling places. This was approximately 20% of the total votes in Glendale for that election. Sadly, some voters did not have the time or ability to go to the second location. A detailed report is attached.

The current requirement for informing voters of polling place changes – either temporary or permanent – is inadequate. Statute 10.01 (d) requires what is called a type D notice, a newspaper ad the day before an election. While newspaper notices are valuable, many people now get their information from other sources such as online sites.

We ask that you formally request that the Assembly Committee on Elections consider the amendments below, and direct your staff to work to improve this type of protection for voters.

SB-116 should be amended as follows:

- Polling places shall be established by the governing body for each election at least 60 days before each election, unless there is an unexpected emergency. (If all of the provisions below are enacted into law, this 60 days could be reduced to 45 days.)
- Municipalities are encouraged to mail notices to all registered voters. If this is not done then a notice shall be posted during normal voting hours on election day, at all locations that had been a polling place for the previous election, but are not currently a polling place.
- For at least the 30-day period before each election, SVRS shall have accurate polling place information online, so that Voter Public Access gives correct information.
- For at least the 30 day period before each election, any municipality that has a website shall have posted on the website all polling place changes since the last election.

Glendale Closed Polls – Tuesday, July 12, 2001 – Glendale, WI

Submitted by: Tanya Lohr-Kougl, West Bend

What we did:

28 different volunteers stood outside four of the closed polls in Glendale on July 12th. Their purpose was to inform any voters who showed up at the closed polls that the poll was closed and that the single, open poll was at City Hall. The volunteers also offered voters a map from the closed poll to the open poll and encouragement to go to that poll to vote.

Why we did it:

We were very concerned that people in Glendale were going to be denied their right to vote on July 12th because of the closed polls. Tanya Lohr, the organizer of the effort, called the Glendale City Hall to ask what was going to be done to inform Glendale residents of the change. They would not give her specifics, but she was assured that voters would know about the change and that few people would show up at the closed polls. However, it became increasingly obvious that this was not the case, so we decided to stand at the closed polls in order to protect people's right to vote.

What we found:

We were anticipating 3-4 voters per 2-hour shift to show up at the closed polls. What we found instead was an average of 21 voters who showed up at each closed poll per 2-hour shift, which includes the last shift where less than 10 people showed up per location. A minimum of 505 voters came to the closed polls on July 12th fully expecting to be able to vote there. Our conclusion was that Glendale voters had NOT been properly informed of the change.

How we think the closed polls negatively effected voter turn out:

1. Even with our presence, the closed polls kept numerous Glendale residents from voting on July 12th. They showed up at the closed poll on their way to work and did not have time to go back to City Hall. We encouraged them to vote after work, but many of them weren't going to be back in time.
2. Due to the one, open poll, the lines at that polling place became very long. In fact, there were times when the wait was over one hour long. Numerous people left the line because they didn't have time to wait that long to vote. Had the other polls been open, there wouldn't have been that long of a wait.
3. Several of the people who came to the closed polls were so angry about it that they said they weren't going to vote anymore. They stated that it was obvious that their vote doesn't matter anymore so to hell with the whole system.
4. One woman walked over a mile to the closed poll with her daughter. They could not walk an additional 6 miles to the one, open poll.
5. One woman unloaded her four young children before our volunteers could get to her to inform her that the poll was closed. She gave an exasperated sigh and said there was no way she was going to pack, unpack and pack her kids all up again to vote in another location. She did not vote that day.
6. In general, voters left the closed polls angry, frustrated, and in many cases, feeling undervalued. That's not what voting should be about. Voting should be about people feeling empowered about their ability to have a voice in their government and feeling proud that they were able to use that voice.

In general, 20% of the voters in Glendale that day showed up at a closed poll first. It was obvious to us that either the City of Glendale did not actually follow the recommended method of informing voters of changes to polling places OR the recommended method is in need of revision in order to reach more voters.