

## Maryland elections board to recommend no in-person voting for June primary

By Emily Opilo

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The State Board of Elections is recommending that there be no in-person voting for the June 2 primary due to the new coronavirus pandemic, pushing citizens to mail-in or drop-off ballots that would be sent to every one of Maryland's more than 4 million voters.

Leaning on advice from state health officials, who said they could not guarantee protective equipment for poll workers, board members opted Wednesday against allowing in-person voting — even under limited circumstances. State election officials presented that path, along with other choices, at an online meeting of the board.

Under the current plan, which remains in draft form but must be submitted by April 3 to Gov. Larry Hogan, all eligible voters would receive ballots by mail before June 2. Voters could then cast those ballots by mail, using a postage-paid envelope included with the ballot, or place them in drop boxes at locations yet to be determined.

The five-member board was ordered last week to submit the plan to the governor as part of his executive order to postpone the state's April 28 primary. At the same time, the governor ordered a special general election for the 7th Congressional District, also slated for April 28, to be held on schedule but by mail only.

He stopped short of making a decision on the mechanics of the June 2 primary, but ordered the upcoming report from the board.

Marylanders will vote in the primary for nominees for president and the U.S. House. Baltimore voters also will pick nominees for mayor, City Council president, city comptroller and City Council seats.

Over the course of a bleak, three-hour discussion, board members lamented their inability to predict the course the virus will take by early June. Several favored keeping in-person voting an option on a limited basis at early voting centers. Early voting is currently scheduled for May 21-28.

"We could sit here and say the June 2 election will be vote by mail, it will have early voting options, it will have voting centers on Election Day — and the governor, the chief executive, could close everything down on May 30," said Patrick Hogan, vice chairman of the board.

"We could always drop the plan to have voting centers if the situation was getting worse," said board member Kelley Howells. "That would at least give us the option."

State elections staff members urged the board to make a final decision. If ballots are to be mailed to all voters, they should go out by the last week of April, said Nikki Charlson, deputy administrator for the

Board of Elections. Instructions would have to be included with those ballots on how to return them, she said, and those should be in their final form when the ballots go out.

“I appreciate that things are changing, but at some point we have to make a decision,” Charlson said.

“Do you feel we can safely and practically have early voting with early voting centers for the June election?” asked board member William Voelp. “Is that safe and practical?”

Charlson said such an election would be “challenged” by the lack of equipment to reduce the exposure poll workers would have to the virus, which has already sickened hundreds of Marylanders and killed four people in the state.

A survey of the state’s existing poll workers showed 40% could not work a proposed early voting period in late May and 20% were unwilling or unable to serve at polling enters during the June 2 primary. That likely will get worse as more people get sick, Charlson said.

“I can’t vote to put our people in harm’s way without equipment,” Voelp said.

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Ultimately, board members agreed to recommend against in-person voting, although they did not take a final vote. Board of elections staff members are expected to finalize the plan with the board’s guidance and present it April 2 to the board for a vote — the day before it is due to the governor.

Board Chairman Michael Cogan said the plan needs to be presented to the governor with an urgent recommendation that every measure be taken to publicize the changes to the state’s standard election plan.

“We are changing the way people in Maryland are accustomed to voting, and we’re changing it in a big way,” he said. “We’ve got to get it out on every platform.”

The draft plan presented to the board Wednesday included numerous concerns raised by state elections officials about the complications of changing voting procedures on short notice. Among them was the need to dramatically increase Maryland’s mail-in voting capacity.

Maryland already allows voting by mail with absentee ballots, which voters can get simply by filling out an application.

But the plan would be a significant expansion of voting by mail. There are more than 4 million active registered voters in Maryland. The state only mailed 225,653 absentee ballots for the 2016 presidential election. About 177,000 of those ballots were returned for counting by elections officials.

State officials said they likely would need to hire a vendor to handle the increased number of ballots and expand the capacity of their online voter registration portal.

Board members questioned how the state will verify that ballots are being cast by the actual voters they sent them to. Charlson said the state’s current absentee ballot procedure is to check for a signature.

"We're not actually looking at the signatures, are we?" asked Howells. "In vote-by-mail states, I think they used software to compare the signatures."

"Our problem is we are not a vote-by-mail state, so we have no real safeguards built into it," Cogan said.

The board quickly moved on from the topic.

The governor will have the ultimate authority to accept or reject the Board of Elections's recommendations, based on the state of emergency he declared in response to the virus. Asked previously if he was open to a mail-only primary in June, he said he was "open to all suggestions."