

Commission on Local Government

Estimate of Local Fiscal Impact

2015 General Assembly Session

Bill: SB677

Patron: Howell

Date: 1/20/2015

In accordance with the provisions of §30-19.03 of the Code of Virginia, the staff of the Commission on Local Government offers the following analysis of the above-referenced legislation:

Bill Summary:

Allows qualified voters to vote absentee in person without providing an excuse for not being able to vote in person on election day. The bill retains the statutory list of specific reasons allowing a voter to cast an absentee ballot by mail.

Executive Summary:

SB 677 allows registered voters to vote absentee in-person. It also indicates that the voter does not need to provide a reason for voting absentee in-person rather than on the day of the election.

Respondents to an inquiry for analysis by CLG have indicated that the expected costs of SB 677 will range from \$500-63,566 per year.

It is unclear how a locality will comply with the provisions of SB 677. If a jurisdiction is allowed to hold in-person absentee voting at the Registrar's office, then costs can be minimized. Costs to local governments could balloon if they are required to open multiple precincts for early voting. In the case of the latter, the fiscal impact of SB 677 appears to be directly correlated to the population of the locality. The likelihood that voters will vote early instead of on the day of the election is an unknown factor that can affect the costs to localities. If more residents opt to vote early rather than on Election Day, personnel costs could increase above the estimates provided in this report.

If localities must open multiple voting centers for early voting, then personnel costs will increase. It is also likely that facilities will need to be rented or repurposed.

Local Analysis:

Locality: City of Chesapeake

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$40,000.00

We expect this effort would bring out a lot of voters who just want to vote early. In most cases we would expect minimal cost related to this issue, however if the number of voters were to get large, we would need to hire additional temporary personnel. With all of the unknowns, it is difficult for the City to make a precise estimate, but we would estimate additional costs of up to \$5,000 per non-presidential election. The amount could be much greater during presidential elections. The City estimated two elections each year and the impact could range from \$10,000-40,000 annually.

Locality: City of Lexington (2)

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$1,000.00

The only projected incremental costs are for copying forms and ballots used for absentee voting.

Locality: City of Lynchburg

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$2,500.00

It is difficult to discern the fiscal impact without knowing all the parameters. This is basically "early voting" and it depends if the Commonwealth is allowing absentee voting only at the Registrar's Office or if voting centers are being established for walk-in voting. Additional personnel would be needed to accommodate voters at the Registrar's Office or voting centers. A part-time FTE would cost about \$2,500 and the number needed is determined by the number of locations where a citizen can vote absentee. If votes are only accepted at the Registrar's Office, then the minimum would be \$2,500. The cost could be much higher than this.

Locality: City of Portsmouth

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$26,417.00

The no-excuse absentee voting would have a significant financial impact on the Registrar's Office. Absentee voting begins 45 days prior to each general and primary election and, while this bill would allow more citizens to vote, modifications would have to be made to accommodate the increase in expected voter turnout. For instance, every day during the last two weeks of absentee voting in the 2008 presidential election, more than 500 eligible voters cast an absentee ballot from 8:00 a.m. until well after 9:00 p.m. With no-excuse absentee voting, there would not be a way to gauge the amount of voters that would show up on a daily basis.

Each election is unpredictable and flexibility is necessary to determine staff levels, both in the office and at voting centers. The level of our services is not optional; our services are mandated by federal and state laws. As it stands, on election day at least five to six officers of election serve the voting public at each of our voting precincts. According to the City's Registrar, the implementation of SB 677 would call for the establishment of an official voting precinct at City Hall. The Registrar estimates that the financial impact would be as follows: six election officers working 8 hrs a day with a salary of \$12.23 per hour for 8 hrs = \$97.84 X 6 officers = \$587.04 per day X 45 days = \$26,416.68 per election.

Locality: City of Roanoke

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$3,600.00

Costs would likely double for initiation during a presidential election year. In addition to the part-time wage expense, additional office space would be needed to accommodate more absentee voters in the office area.

Locality: Henrico County

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$41,340.00

Henrico County, in order to account for the additional demand related to removing requirements for voting absentee, would require a minimum of three additional sites staffed with five people. The estimated fiscal impact is reflective of the additional personnel costs to staff these sites. This estimate does not include any supply costs or facility cost as supplies would need to be determined later and the impact assessment assumes the new sites would be current County facilities.

Locality: Henry County

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$63,566.00

Henry County opposes SB 677.

It would difficult for the Henry County Registrar's Office and especially so if there are several elections in one year. Henry County is split between the 5th and 9th Congressional Districts, and one precinct is split between the two Districts. The County Registrar is required to report election results by Congressional Districts for every election. The County is also split between the 9th, 14th, and 16th districts of the House of Delegates. One precinct is split between the 14th and 16th House district. Henry County also has staggered terms for Board of Supervisors and School Board. For November 3, 2015 Henry County will have nine different ballots and an inexperienced assistant could make mistakes. Due to the splits it would be almost impossible for a full-time or part-time person to learn everything that is required in order to assist with absentee voting.

It would be necessary for the County to hire at least two additional full time Assistant Registrars to properly conduct absentee voting. All assistants must be thoroughly trained in using the Department of Elections Veris System. The minimum starting salary for each would be \$27,303.00 (Grade 14). It would also be necessary to hire two part-time assistants at \$10.00 per hour. Absentee Voting begins 45 days before each election. The two part-time assistants must be trained at least one month, or for 23 days prior to the 45 day period at a cost of \$3,680.00, and would be paid \$5,280.00 during the 45 day period. They would work a total of 33 days during the 45 day period. Total cost for part-time assistants is \$8,960.00. The additional cost for no-excuse absentee voting in Henry County would be at least \$63,566.00, not counting benefits for full time employees.

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**Locality:** Loudoun County

**Estimated Fiscal Impact:** \$30,000.00

It appears that the bill would apply to the entire absentee voting period, which is 45 days prior to the election (37 days excluding weekends), but does not require the County to offer additional locations. We would anticipate about \$400 per day for additional staffing in the main General Registrar's office for 37 days. If, however, there is a sizeable increase, we may need to provide additional satellite locations. Recently, the County's two satellite locations were reduced to being used for only one week prior to November elections. We would likely have to expand the use of the satellite locations which cost about \$3,000 per week. Overall, the change could cost Loudoun County approximately \$20,000 - \$30,000.

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Locality: Madison County

Estimated Fiscal Impact: \$30,000.00

If passed, an assumption of additional absentee voters is made, which would increase workload and may require more space. The fiscal impact of personnel and additional space should be considered and any additional costs should be paid by the State.

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**Locality:** Prince George County

Prince George County does not feel this is necessary because there are nineteen valid reasons on the absentee application which a person can use to vote absentee. The reasons include being sick and disabled, caretaker, vacations, work, college student or spouse, military or spouse, pregnancy, election workers, religious obligations, first responders, etc.

It would create many obstacles for the office in the logistics of planning an election and assuring each precinct has the proper supplies for the voters that appear at the precinct. Extra office staff would be necessary to handle the voters that come into the office to do in-person absentee voting. Ballots that are mailed would be an extra expense because there would be a lot more of them. Right now the postage and certification fee is \$1.14 to mail each ballot.

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Locality: Rappahannock County **Estimated Fiscal Impact:** \$1,000.00

While the number of absentee voters that come to vote in-person will likely increase, the numbers are unlikely to be enormous. Perhaps the inclusion of some dividers in existing space to allow for privacy in our central absentee polling place will be needed, but no other expense is likely.

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**Locality:** Richmond County **Estimated Fiscal Impact:** \$500.00

There should be little impact to Richmond County on this bill (probably less than \$500). The County has questions related to SB 677. When will this option open and close prior to the election in question? Will the locality be able to dictate those times? Will regular business hours be acceptable or will it require other office hours? These items are probably covered under 24.2-701. Also it seems like the 11 provisions of 24.2-700 are no longer needed if this will apply to all qualified voters.

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Locality: Rockingham County

We do not anticipate a fiscal impact.

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**Locality:** Town of Buchanan

Voting for the Town of Buchanan is handled by Botetourt County. The County's Registrar could be affected.

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Locality: Town of Front Royal **Estimated Fiscal Impact:** \$1,250.00

While the County Voter Registrar is responsible for tallying votes, it would appear that additional staff time would be required to process mailed ballots.

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**Locality:** York County

**Estimated Fiscal Impact:** \$50,000.00

Additional space will have to be obtained for election-related purposes, and they must be available for every election held in the locality. Facilities would have to be rented, bought, built, or repurposed.

In North Carolina, in-person, no-excuse absentee voting comprised approximately 56% of the total turnout in the November 2012 presidential election held in that state. If this same level of in-person absentee voting had been replicated in York County in 2012, we would have had approximately 19,100 residents voting in-person absentee prior to Election Day, instead of the 1,738 who actually did so. In other words, we would have had an increase of approximately 998.96% over our actual in-person absentee voting.

York County does not have adequate, readily available space to accommodate the approximately 19,100 voters who would have wanted to vote early in 2012. It is my belief that most localities (if not all) in Virginia would have had similar space issues. It is impractical to use schools for early or no-excuse absentee voting because of the impact such use would have on their primary mission if major parts of their facilities (such as gyms) were repurposed for election-only business for weeks prior to Election Day. The facilities used for early or no-excuse absentee voting would need to be consistently available for every election, too, in order to not frustrate voters who become accustomed to voting in a particular place, as well as to minimize the cost of advertising and/or mailing notices to inform voters of the locations for early or no-excuse absentee voting. The facilities that would be obtained for early or no-excuse absentee voting would have to be able to accommodate a presidential-level turnout in order to ensure that the spaces are adequate for all elections during the four-year election cycle. In addition, York County would still need space in its offices to conduct by-mail absentee voting preparations and processing, as well as other normal office processes. Accordingly, the amount of space in our offices that we can provide for early or no-excuse absentee voting is limited because of other office demands.

These facilities would need to be equitably placed around a locality. Additional facilities for early or no-excuse absentee voting would need to be placed around the County.

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