

October 20, 2022

Sent via email

Board of Voter Registration and Elections of Beaufort County
15 John Galt Rd
Beaufort, SC 29906
Vote.Beaufort@Elections.SC.Gov

Subject: Additional Early Voting Centers in Beaufort County

Dear Chairman Felix, Vice Chairman Dore, and Members of the Board:

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (“LDF”) writes to encourage you to add additional early voting centers for the November 2022 election in Beaufort County, and to do so in locations that are more accessible for Black voters.

South Carolina law authorizes counties, including Beaufort County, to designate up to seven early voting centers for an election.¹ In doing so, counties “must consider geography, population, and ADA compliant accessibility.”² In addition, they “must distribute the locations throughout the county to maximize accessibility for all voters in the county to the greatest extent possible.”³ Under each of these criteria, as well as considerations of fairness and racial equity, Beaufort County’s current early voting plan falls short.

According to the 2020 Census, Beaufort County is home to 187,117 residents,⁴ who live across a geographical expanse of 576 square miles.⁵ 138,838 of Beaufort County’s residents are currently registered to vote.⁶ However, for the November 2022 election, Beaufort County has thus far identified only four

¹ S.C. Code § 7-13-25(D). While counties must identify early voting centers by March 10 before the primary election, *id.* § 7-13-25(G)(2), they may establish additional early voting centers after March 10 subject to the approval of the Executive Director of the State Election Commission, *id.* § 7-13-25(G)(3).

² *Id.* § 7-13-25(G)(1).

³ *Id.*

⁴ See U.S. Census Bureau, *2020 Decennial Census*.

⁵ Beaufort County Econ. Dev. Corp., *About Beaufort County* (2022), <https://southerncarolina.org/beaufort/about>.

⁶ S.C. Elec. Comm’n. *SC Voter Registration Demographics: Beaufort County*, <https://info.scvotes.sc.gov/Eng/VoterStatistics/VoterHistory/CountyAndPrecinct.aspx> (select “Beaufort” and “Totals” in drop-down menus) (last visited Oct. 20, 2022).

early voting centers.⁷ This decision would force each location to serve an average of 34,709 registered voters, over an average of 144 square miles. It appears likely to result in long lines and crowding at the polls.⁸ As a matter of efficient election administration and sound governmental policy, therefore, Beaufort County’s decision to designate only four early voting centers is highly questionable.

Moreover, the four early voting centers that Beaufort County has designated to date⁹ do not appear to be equally accessible for the County’s communities of Black voters, raising concerns that Black voters in Beaufort County may be denied an equal opportunity to participate in the political process during early voting in the November 2022 election.¹⁰

As Map 1 below reveals, the four early voting centers identified thus far by Beaufort County are grouped in the county’s central and southern portions. None of these centers is suitably located for Black voters in the county’s northern portions. The communities of Sheldon, Yemassee, and Seabrook stand out as particularly underserved. Each of these communities has a significantly higher proportion of Black residents than Beaufort County as a whole—while the county’s overall population is only 17.2% Black, Sheldon’s population is 79.4% Black, Yemassee’s population is 64.6% Black, and Seabrook’s population is 54.4% Black.¹¹

⁷ Beaufort County, S.C., *Board of Voter Registration and Elections of Beaufort County*, <https://www.beaufortcountysc.gov/vote/index.html> (last visited Oct. 20, 2022).

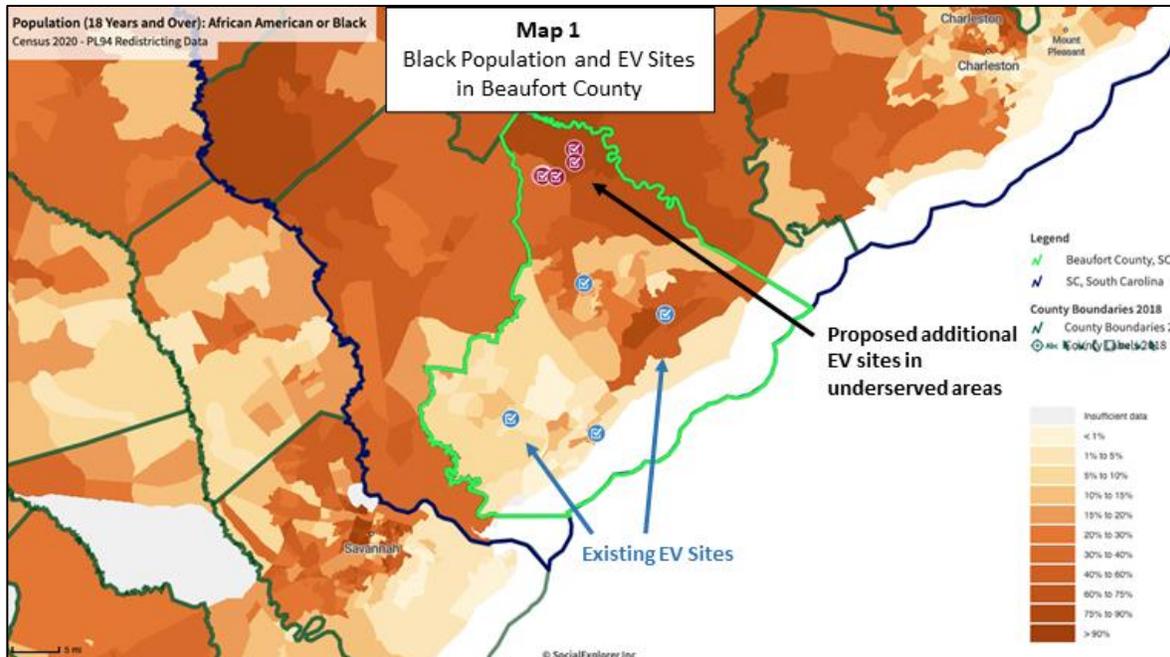
⁸ See Hannah Klain, Kevin Morris, Max Feldman, and Rebecca Ayala, *Waiting to Vote: Racial Disparities in Election Day Experiences* 10, Brennan Center for Justice (June 3, 2020), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/waiting-vote> (examining nationwide data from the 2018 election and concluding that “voters in counties with the most voters per polling place waited more than twice as long as voters in counties with the fewest voters per polling place”); see also Christopher Famighetti, *Long Voting Lines: Explained* 6, Brennan Center for Justice, https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/Long_Voting_Lines_Explained.pdf (reporting that “the strongest predictor of delays is the number of eligible voters each center serves”).

⁹ The four sites are: Board of Voter Registration and Elections of Beaufort County (Main Office), 15 John Galt Road, Beaufort, SC 29902; Bluffton Recreation Center (Satellite Office), located at 61B Ulmer Road, Bluffton, SC 29910; Hilton Head Government Center, 539 William Hilton Parkway, Hilton Head Island, SC 29928; and Saint Helena Branch Library, 6355 Jonathan Francis Senior Rd, St. Helena Island, SC 29920. Beaufort County, S.C., *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ See 52 U.S.C. § 10301(b) (explaining that Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is violated if “the political processes leading to nomination or election in the State or political subdivision are not equally open to participation by members of a [racial or language minority group] in that its members have less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the political process and to elect candidates of their choice”).

¹¹ See U.S. Census Bureau, *2020 Decennial Census*.

Additionally, estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey indicate that households in these three predominantly Black communities have lower rates of vehicle access than households in Beaufort County overall.¹² Countywide, only 4.3% of households have no vehicle available. But this rate rises to 6.4% for households in Yemassee, 7.9% for households in Sheldon, and 9.3% for households in Seabrook.¹³ For voters in these northern communities, traveling to one of the county’s existing early voting centers may be a substantial barrier.



Currently, as Map 1 above illustrates, the nearest early voting center to Sheldon, Yemassee, or Seabrook is the County Voter Registration and Elections Office in Beaufort. However, this location is more than 9 miles of driving distance away from Seabrook, 15 miles away from Sheldon, and 22 away miles from Yemassee. Neither this site nor any other early voting center thus far designated by Beaufort County adequately or equally serves Black voters in these communities.

The inequity in access created by Beaufort County’s initial early voting plan can and should be addressed. As discussed above, South Carolina law gives

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*, accessed at https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=vehicle&g=0500000US2207,45013_1600000US4564690,4565590,4579450&tid=ACSDP5Y2020.DP04.

¹³ *Id.*

you explicit statutory authority to designate up to seven early voting centers.¹⁴ And you are under an obligation, as discussed above, to consider geography and population in designing your early voting plan, in order to appropriately “distribute the locations throughout the county to maximize accessibility for all voters[.]”¹⁵

Therefore, to provide reasonable and fair accessibility to early voting for Beaufort County’s Black voters, and to more appropriately distribute locations throughout the county, we urge you to designate three additional early voting centers in Sheldon, Seabrook, and Yemassee. There are numerous viable options that you could explore for these locations, including the following:

1. Booker T. Washington Center, 182 Booker T Washington Cir, Yemassee, SC 29945
2. Christian Home Society, 1 Jacob White Rd, Yemassee, SC 29945
3. Huspah Baptist Church, 18 Huspah Baptist Church Rd, Seabrook, SC 29940
4. Boys and Girls Club of Sheldon, 21 Agnes Major Rd, Sheldon, SC 29941
5. Canaan Baptist Church, 908 Trask Pkwy, Sheldon, SC 29941
6. Sheldon Baptist Church, 15 Sheldon Baptist Church Dr, Beaufort, SC 29906
7. Springhill AME Church, 20 Paige Point Rd, Sheldon, SC 29941
8. Seabrook EMS 26, 5 Fire Station Ln, Seabrook, SC 29940

We urge you to act promptly in addressing this inequity. We understand that the decision to establish early voting centers involves a nuanced set of considerations regarding funding, accessibility, and compliance with state law. But it is important for you to act to address the access disparities we have identified above. This matter is urgent—as you know, early voting begins on Monday, October 24. To discuss these recommendations further, please feel free to contact Steven Lance at slance@naacpldf.org.

Sincerely,

/s/ Steven Lance

Amir Badat, Manager, Prepared to Vote and Voting Rights Defender Projects

¹⁴ S.C. Code § 7-13-25(D).

¹⁵ *Id.* § 7-13-25(G)(1).

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