

The Town of Red Hook Board of Trustees
7340 South Broadway
Red Hook, NY 12571

Dear Trustee,

Voting is a fundamental right in our democracy. It is a right that I seek to exercise as a citizen. I believe that equal access and participation in the electoral system is necessary in a just democratic society. As an elected official, I know that you and I share this belief.

I am writing to you today to address the important matter of polling site accessibility. My local polling site, the facility for Red Hook's Election District 5, is located at a location not easily accessible to me, nor easily accessible to the majority of voters in this voting district, and nor easily accessible to those voters who utilize mobility aids.

This concern follows a history of voting accessibility issues for college-age voters in the County. In 1979, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Symm vs. United States* that denying college students the presumption of bona fide residency was unconstitutional. Decades after that decision, college students in Dutchess County faced undue and unjustified barriers to voting. The egregious disenfranchisement tactics occurred consistently until the year 2004. During that time, young registered voters in Dutchess County were systematically barred from voting through the use of a "supplemental" questionnaire. The Board of Elections required this supplemental form exclusively from voters residing at college residences. The practice ended in 2004, after students and administrators from Bard, Vassar, and Marist, civil rights organizations, and a bi-partisan group of local elected officials united to put an end to this unjust practice. Since then, conditions improved but litigation was required in 2009 and in 2012 to ensure the equal treatment and enfranchisement of college-age voters.

On Election Day 2014, according to information provided by the Dutchess County Board of Elections, 916 voters were active and eligible to vote, in-person, in Red Hook's Election District 5. Of those 916 voters, 623 voters resided at Bard or at a private residence wholly encompassed by Bard grounds. In other words, on Election Day 2014, 68% of active voters in my voting district resided on-campus.

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I have to ask: given that my voting district's population center is here at home, at Bard, why must I travel 3 miles to vote?

In addition to the unnecessary distance, my polling site is located on an un-lit and high-speed county road that has no pedestrian sidewalks. The present polling site is irrefutably inaccessible by foot. A polling site on Bard's campus would be immediately accessible by foot to 68% of all voters in my voting district.

Furthermore, the current polling site is inaccessible by mass transit. However, a polling site at Bard College would be accessible by LOOP Bus. It is important to note that, in 2010, NYS Election Law was amended to give preference to sites accessible by mass transit; "each polling place designated, whenever practicable, shall be situated directly on a public transportation route." (NY Elec L § 4-104 [6] [a])

A polling site at a facility owned by Bard College would resolve these long-standing concerns.

I urge you to pass a proposal, like this Board did in 2009, recommending that the Board of Elections relocate the Red Hook Election District 5 polling site to a facility at Bard College. Although such recommendation from the Town Board serves only as an advisory opinion, I believe, if it is once again asked by this Town Board, that the Board of Elections will ultimately rule on the side of equity, accessibility, and common sense.

College marks the first time many young people are eligible to vote and the younger a person is when they develop the habit of voting, the more likely they are to vote consistently. I ask that you defend my right to vote and that you advocate for my peers, a population historically targeted and marginalized in this county.

The facts are with us and I can say that we are grateful that Bard College has offered its facilities for use as a polling site.

Kindest Regards,

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