

VIA E-MAIL (Columbus.BOE@columbusco.org)

June 23, 2026

To: Columbus County Board of Elections  
Jillian McPherson-Edge, Chair  
Lynn Fairfax, Secretary  
Lynne Thompson, Member  
Wanda Brooks, Member  
Rodney Singletary, Member

cc: Ashley Collins, Elections Director  
Felicia Brown, Senior Election Specialist  
Hilda Price, Election Specialist

**Re: The June 8 Proposal to Close Two Columbus County Early Voting Sites**

Dear Members of the Columbus County Board of Elections,

We write to express deep concerns with an updated proposal made by Chair McPherson-Edge during the Monday, June 8, 2026, meeting of the Columbus County Board of Elections (the “Board”) to close the early voting sites at the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department.

**If adopted, this proposal would cause large-scale disruption and confusion during early voting, long lines during peak hours in early voting and on election day, and impose prohibitive travel and time requirements that risk disenfranchising the county’s most marginalized voters.** We therefore urge the Board to maintain all five early voting sites, including the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department, as it has in the past two general elections.

**1. Closing the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff early voting sites would depart from nearly two decades of voting plans in the county.**

Columbus County has offered an early voting site at the Ransom Event Center and at or near the Fair Bluff Fire Department in *every general election* going back to at least 2008—the first year for which the North Carolina State Board of Election provides this data.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *One-Stop Early Voting*, North Carolina State Board of Elections, <https://dl.ncsbe.gov/?prefix=One-Stop+Early+Voting/>. The Ransom Event Center is known in previous early voting plans as the “EC Senior Center” or “Riegelwood Senior Center.” The only year in this period in which Fair Bluff did not host an early voting site was 2018. However, Cerro Gordo hosted an early voting site in 2018 that was a 7-minute drive from the Fair Bluff Fire Department).

Closing early voting at or near these two sites would therefore be an unprecedented restriction in 2026 causing significant confusion, as voters will reasonably be expecting voting at these locations. Consistency and accessibility significantly impact turnout: Closing these sites would almost certainly cause confusion and reduce the number of voters able to cast a ballot.<sup>2</sup>

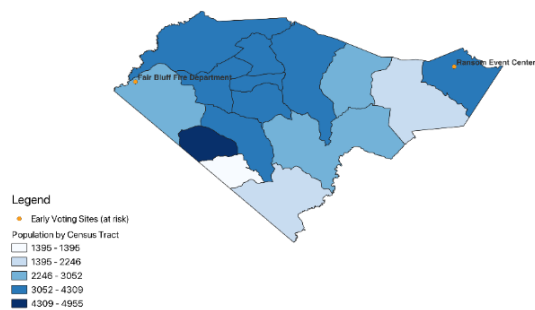
At the June 8 meeting, Chair McPherson-Edge purported to show concern about the eligible voters not engaging in elections. After the early voting discussion, she proposed a “community outreach” plan involving inviting local high school students to future Board meetings.<sup>3</sup> She stated that community outreach is “very important” to her because “a significant number of registered voters are not participating” in elections in Columbus County, and “the turnout in many elections remains far below what any of us would like to see.”<sup>4</sup>

If Chair McPherson-Edge truly cares about community outreach and increasing election turnout, then her number one objective for the upcoming general election should be keeping the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff early voting sites open. Closing these sites would depress voter turnout, contrary to the Chair’s stated goal.

## 2. The Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department serve thousands of the county’s voters, including vulnerable voters who need these sites to participate.

Voter confusion and voting disruption are especially likely given the significant rate at which voters have utilized early voting at the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department. The Ransom Event Center was the third most utilized early voting site in 2024, and it was the second most utilized in 2018 and 2016.<sup>5</sup> Over 1,100 people voted at the Fair Bluff Fire Department in 2024, and over 1,200 voted there in 2020.<sup>6</sup> As indicated in the figure, these sites are located around high population density on the western and eastern reaches of the county.

Columbus County Population by Census Tract



Importantly, Columbus County voters are using early voting more and more each election cycle. The rate of early voting has *increased* in Columbus County over the past few elections.

<sup>2</sup> See Enrico Cantoni, *A Precinct Too Far: Turnout and Voting Costs*, 12 Am. Econ. J.: Applied Econ. 63 (2020) (finding that a 0.245 mile “increase in distance to the polling place reduces the number of ballots cast by” by 2–5%); see also Henry E. Brady & John E. McNulty, *Turning out to Vote: The Costs of Finding and Getting to the Polling Place*, 105 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 128 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Columbus County Board of Elections, *Board of Elections Meeting*, at 1:16:13 (Facebook, June 8, 2026), <https://www.facebook.com/reel/3915399438595789>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See Exhibit A (attached excel spreadsheet titled “2016\_2024EVanalysis” compiling turnout data from the North Carolina State Board of Elections, which can be found on its website here: <https://dl.ncsbe.gov/?prefix=ENRS/>).

<sup>6</sup> See *id.* While these are significant numbers of early voters, the amounts would likely be even higher if not for the impacts of hurricanes and flooding that Fair Bluff has experienced over the last decade. See Colin Campbell, *After two hurricanes, Fair Bluff moves its downtown to higher ground*, WUNC News (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://www.wunc.org/politics/2023-12-01/hurricanes-fair-bluff-downtown-flooding-nc-lumber>.

Approximately 52% of all county voters utilized early voting in 2022, and that figure rose to 70% in 2024.<sup>7</sup> The total number of Columbus County early voters rose from 8,322 in the 2018 general election to 10,090 in 2022, and the number jumped from 17,008 in the 2020 presidential election to 18,577 in 2024.<sup>8</sup> These statistics show that closing these early voting sites would likely disrupt the plans of tens of thousands of voters through either closed sites or longer lines at remaining sites or election-day precincts, impacting a significant portion of Columbus County voters.

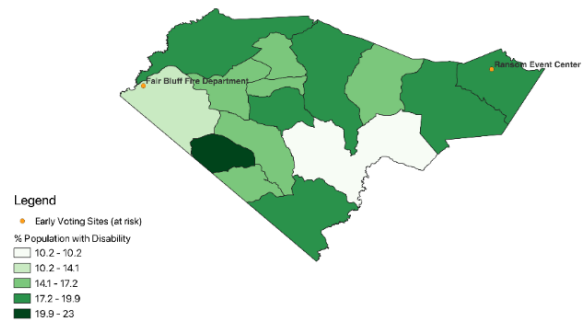
### 3. Closing these early voting sites will hurt rural, elderly, disabled, and low-income voters for whom accessible early voting is most crucial.

The Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department are in rural parts of the county that have high numbers of elderly voters. Also, the area around the Ransom Event Center has a disproportionately high number of disabled voters, and the area around the Fair Bluff Fire Department has a disproportionately high number of voters living in poverty.

In 2024, over 35% of early voters at the Ransom Event Center were aged 65 and older.<sup>9</sup> In 2022, over 45% of early voters were in this age group.<sup>10</sup> Recent census data also indicates that over 18% of people living in Ransom Event Center's census tract are considered disabled, compared to 14% statewide.<sup>11</sup>

Fair Bluff serves a population facing similar barriers to voting. In 2022 and 2024, 40% and 39% (respectively) of Fair Bluff Fire Department's early voters were aged 65 and older.<sup>12</sup> Recent census data similarly indicates that over 18% of people living Fair Bluff Fire Department's census tract are below the federal poverty line, compared to 13% statewide.<sup>13</sup>

Columbus County Disability Rate by Census Tract



Elderly, low-income, and disabled voters often face the most difficult hurdles to casting a ballot. As one walker-using public commenter remarked in the June 8 meeting: “I’m still getting around, but there’s plenty of people all over this county that can’t even get around with a walker, and they

<sup>7</sup> See turnout data from the North Carolina State Board of Elections, which can be found on its website here: <https://dl.ncsbe.gov/?prefix=ENRS/>.

<sup>8</sup> See *supra* n. 5.

<sup>9</sup> See *id.*

<sup>10</sup> See *id.*

<sup>11</sup> See *Disability Characteristics*, United States Census Bureau (Ransom Event Center is in Census Tract 9301), [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2024.S1810?q=disability&g=040XX00US37\\_1400000US37047930100](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2024.S1810?q=disability&g=040XX00US37_1400000US37047930100).

<sup>12</sup> See *supra* n. 5.

<sup>13</sup> See *Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months*, United States Census Bureau (Fair Bluff Fire Department is in Census Tract 9306), [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2024.S1701?q=Poverty&g=040XX00US37\\_1400000US37047930600](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2024.S1701?q=Poverty&g=040XX00US37_1400000US37047930600).

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might not have family that can bring them” to vote.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, closing these two sites is likely to have a “disparate impact on voters who lack the financial means or flexible schedules (*i.e.*, those with little power over their own conditions of work, study, or travel) to surmount the obstacles of time and expense” and thus “impose[] a burden freighted with equal protection concerns.”<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the Ransom Event Center saw high numbers of both Black and Democratic early voters in 2024 and 2022.<sup>16</sup>

<b>2022 EARLY VOTING</b>	<b>All Sites</b>		<b>Ransom Event Center</b>	
WHITE	5853	58%	601	43%
BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN	3618	36%	648	47%
INDIAN AMERICAN or ALASKA NATIVE	203	2%	77	6%
OTHER or UNDESIGNATED	416	4%	6	4%
<b>2024 EARLY VOTING</b>				
<b>2024 EARLY VOTING</b>	<b>All Sites</b>		<b>Ransom Event Center</b>	
WHITE	12520	67%	1421	53%
BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN	4459	24%	901	34%
INDIAN AMERICAN or ALASKA NATIVE	484	3%	184	7%
OTHER or UNDESIGNATED	1114	6%	175	6%

<b>2022 EARLY VOTING</b>	<b>All Sites</b>		<b>Ransom Event Center</b>	
DEMOCRATIC	4,928	49%	814	47%
REPUBLICAN	2,636	26%	352	27%
UNAFILIATED	2,516	25%	219	26%
OTHER	10	0%	1	0%
<b>2024 EARLY VOTING</b>				
<b>2024 EARLY VOTING</b>	<b>All Sites</b>		<b>Ransom Event Center</b>	
DEMOCRATIC	6,247	34%	1,154	43%
REPUBLICAN	6,770	36%	953	36%
UNAFFILIATED	5,506	30%	568	21%
OTHER	54	0%	6	0%

Closing this site could therefore violate N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.35(a), which prohibits early voting plans that disproportionately disfavor any race or party.<sup>17</sup> At the June 8 Board meeting,

<sup>14</sup> Columbus County Board of Elections, *Board of Elections Meeting*, at 0:31:56 (Facebook, June 8, 2026), <https://www.facebook.com/reel/3915399438595789>.

<sup>15</sup> See *Common Cause Ind. v. Marion Cty. Election Bd.*, 311 F. Supp. 3d 949, 969 (S.D. Ind. 2018) (preliminarily enjoining a “one-location” early voting rule as an undue burden on the right to vote in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments and requiring additional voting sites).

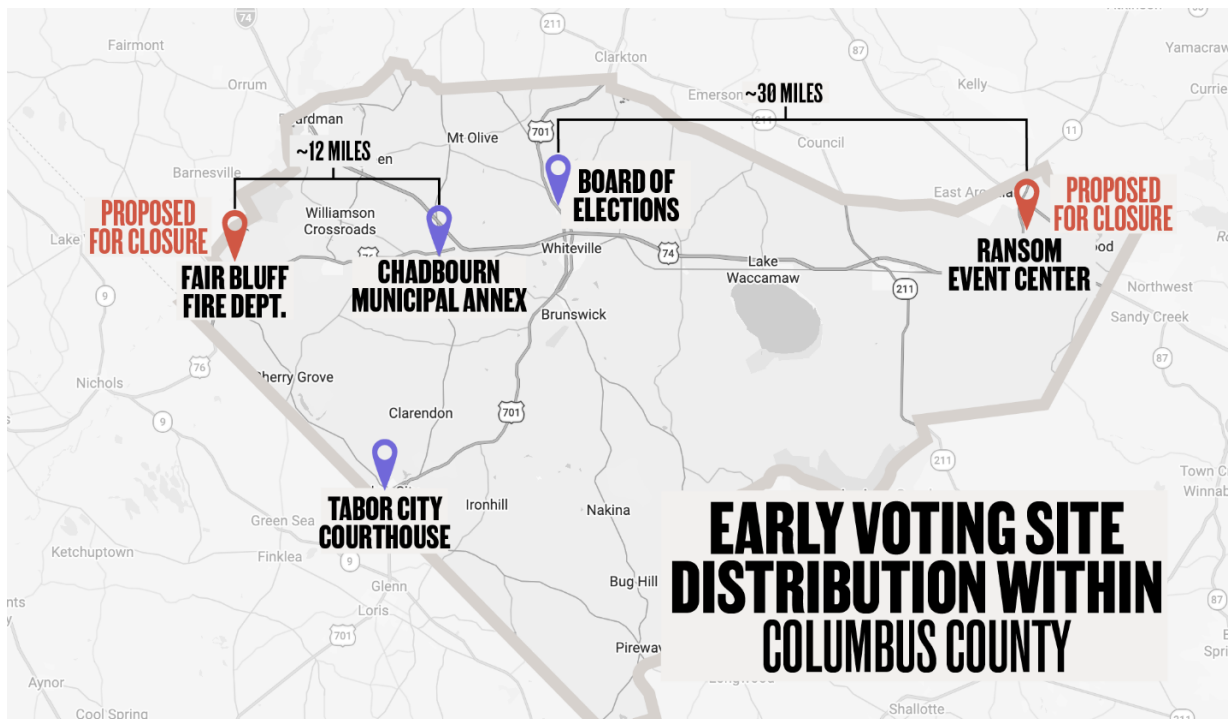
<sup>16</sup> See *supra* n. 5.

<sup>17</sup> See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.35(a) (“The State Board, in that plan, shall take into consideration whether the Plan for Implementation disproportionately favors any party, racial or ethnic group, or candidate”).

Black voters showed up in overwhelming force to oppose the closure of early voting sites.<sup>18</sup> The Board should be sensitive to removing early voting access for Black voters, especially after recent incidents involving Sheriff Jody Greene.<sup>19</sup>

**4. The three early voting sites offered are too far away from the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff communities and will impose unreasonable travel and time burdens on these voters.**

As shown in the figure below, the three early voting sites that Chair McPherson-Edge has proposed to keep open are inadequate to serve the Fair Bluff and Ransom area voting communities. Many voters who have historically utilized the Ransom Event Center will now have *at least* an hour added to their early voting time (not counting the increase in wait times due to long lines).



As one individual stated on June 8, the Board must consider the people living in the east end of Columbus County who work in Wilmington, many of whom are medical professionals.<sup>20</sup> Describing the Board’s proposed early voting plan applied to Wilmington commuters, the commenter said that after getting off work “you’re sitting in traffic, you get off 6:00, you’re waiting for about an hour. Then you’re trying to get all the way from Riegelwood to Whiteville.” She added

<sup>18</sup> Jefferson Weaver, *Opponents to Poll Plan Condemn Board*, Columbus County News (June 10, 2026), <https://columbuscountynews.com/2026/06/opponents-to-poll-plan-condemn-board/>.

<sup>19</sup> See generally Connor Smith, *Where the Jody Greene probe stands, 3 years later*, WECT (Feb 19, 2026), <https://www.wect.com/2026/02/19/wect-investigates-where-jody-greene-probe-stands-3-years-later/> (covering federal and state-level investigations targeting Sheriff Jody Greene, who made racist statements in a phone call released by WECT and is accused of racial bias, intimidation, and making false arrests, among other allegations).

<sup>20</sup> Columbus County Board of Elections, *Board of Elections Meeting*, at 0:06:47 (Facebook, June 8, 2026), <https://www.facebook.com/reel/3915399438595789>.

that “you gotta consider these people like the doctors and the nurses that work 12-hour shifts. You work 12-hour shifts, and the line [to vote] is long, you ain’t gonna get a chance to vote.”

Voters in Fair Bluff would also have to drive greater distances to access early voting. Instead of voting at a convenient site at the Fair Bluff Fire Department, these voters would instead have to drive 24 miles—approximately 30 minutes—round-trip and wait in lines that have grown longer from having to serve more people.

## 5. Columbus County has enough funding for early voting the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department.

It is the “duty of county board[s] of commissioners” to “appropriate reasonable and adequate funds necessary for the legal functions of the county board[s] of elections.”<sup>21</sup> The Columbus County Board of Commissioners appropriated \$688,341 for elections in 2026.<sup>22</sup> It has kept 5 sites open with a lesser budget—even adjusting for inflation—in previous election years.<sup>23</sup>

As a purported reason to close the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department early voting sites, Chair McPherson-Edge cited the \$100 daily fee that each site charges Columbus County during early voting. With an elections budget of \$688,341, it is unconscionable to disenfranchise Columbus County voters to save \$1,700 (0.25% of its annual budget) per site.<sup>24</sup> And there is no indication that Chair McPherson-Edge or anyone else inquired whether the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department would be willing to reduce or waive their daily fees for the 2026 general election before deciding to close these sites.<sup>25</sup>

This funding will provide adequate resources to reserve and staff all five early voting sites, and there is no reasonable basis to close two early voting sites serving thousands of voters on financial grounds.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-37(a).

<sup>22</sup> See *Budget Worksheet: Fiscal Year 2026/2027*, Columbus County, at 12 (June 1, 2026), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/approved-26-27-budget-06.01.26.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> See *id.* (Columbus County had 5 early voting sites in 2024, and it spent \$556,270.37 on elections that year); *Annual Financial Report*, Columbus County, at 99 (June 30, 2023) (Columbus County had 5 early voting sites in 2022 and spent \$430,540 on elections that year), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/columbus-co-afs-6.30.23.pdf>; *Annual Financial Report*, Columbus County, at 75 (June 30, 2021) (Columbus County had 5 early voting sites in 2020 and spent \$440,584 on elections that year), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/2021statement.pdf>; *Financial Statements*, Columbus County, at 72 (June 30, 2019) (Columbus County had 4 early voting sites in 2018 and spent \$451,716 on elections that year), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/audit2019.pdf>; *Financial Statements*, Columbus County, at 74 (June 30, 2017) (Columbus County had 6 early voting sites in 2016 and spent \$609,148 on elections that year), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/audit2017.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> See *Vote Early in Person*, North Carolina State Board of Elections (2026) (showing North Carolina will have 17 days of early voting for the 2026 general election), <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-early-person>.

<sup>25</sup> Voting sites can waive their fees as per N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-33(18)(a).

<sup>26</sup> The Board has not indicated to date any issue with finding poll workers and has not even advertised a need for poll workers on its website. See Exhibit B (screen shots of Board website and Facebook page showing there has been no advertisement for poll workers).

## 6. The Board should craft an early voting plan that serves all voters and ensures access.

A plan that would close the early voting sites at the Ransom Event Center and Fair Bluff Fire Department (or any of the five sites offered in 2022 and 2024) threatens to cause “chaos” rather than “order” in the upcoming general election, presenting undue burdens on voting—without any legitimate state interest—that may violate the First and Fourteenth Amendments.<sup>27</sup>

As public servants, members of County Boards of Elections are expected to serve their communities and take an oath to “well and truly execute the duties” of their office.<sup>28</sup> While we understand there may be improper pressures on members to close or restrict early voting,<sup>29</sup> we urge you to stay true to your obligations to instead implement an early voting plan designed to serve all voters in your county.<sup>30</sup>

At least publicly, North Carolina State Auditor Dave Boliek has stated that one of his goals is to “expand early voting access to underserved areas.”<sup>31</sup> Earlier this year, Auditor Boliek touted that the state had more early voting sites for the 2026 primary compared to the 2022 primary election, adding that “keeping voting accessible to all eligible voters while not budging on security and election integrity is key to conducting secure and fair elections.”<sup>32</sup> These publicly-stated goals appropriately align with legitimate state interests in ensuring free and fair elections for all North Carolinians and should be heeded.<sup>33</sup>

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If you have any questions as you consider early voting plans (for the first time or revising them in light of litigation), or should you be unable to agree on a unanimous plan, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. Our goal, which we hope you share, is to ensure that the early voting

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<sup>27</sup> See *Fusaro v. Cogan*, 930 F.3d 241, 258 (4th Cir. 2019) (“[T]he court must balance the character and magnitude of the burdens imposed against the extent to which the regulations advance the state’s interests in ensuring that order, rather than chaos, is to accompany the democratic processes.”); see also *League of Women voters of Fla., Inc. v. Detzner*, 314 F. Supp. 3d 1205 (N.D. Fla. 2018) (finding that a policy of closing campus voting sites created a travel burden on student voters in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments).

<sup>28</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-30.

<sup>29</sup> See Exhibit C (texts to members of the Board from the Elections Liaison of the Office of the State Auditor, Dallas Woodhouse, recovered in a public records request); Jose Sandoval, *Jackson County GOP chair’s text accuses state leaders of trying to ‘strong arm’ county election officials*, Blue Ridge Public Radio News (June 12, 2026), <https://www.bpr.org/politics-government/2026-06-12/jackson-county-gop-chairs-text-accuses-state-leaders-of-trying-to-strong-arm-county-election-officials>; Colin Campbell, *Granville County joins efforts to move early voting sites under new GOP elections board majority*, WUNC News (June 16, 2026), <https://www.wunc.org/politics/2026-06-16/granville-county-joins-efforts-to-move-early-voting-sites-under-new-gop-elections-board-majority>.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.35(a) (“The State Board, in that plan, shall take into consideration whether the Plan for Implementation disproportionately favors any party, racial or ethnic group, or candidate”).

<sup>31</sup> *Election Training and Information Sessions*, North Carolina Office of the State Auditor (Dec. 2025), <https://www.auditor.nc.gov/local-chairs-presentation/open>.

<sup>32</sup> *Early Voting to Begin with More Voting Sites, Voting Hours*, North Carolina Office of the State Auditor (Feb. 11, 2026), <https://www.auditor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/02/11/early-voting-begin-more-voting-sites-voting-hours>.

<sup>33</sup> N.C. Const. art. I, § 10 (“All elections shall be free.”).

# **Southern Coalition for Social Justice**

plan adopted by or ordered into effect for Columbus County is one that ensures that voters are able to access their fundamental right to vote.

Sincerely,

Hilary Harris Klein  
Senior Counsel, Voting Rights  
Southern Coalition for Social Justice