

# Southern Coalition for Social Justice

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

June 5, 2026

To: Columbus County Board of Elections  
Jillian McPherson-Edge, Chair  
Jeffery Register, Secretary  
Audrey Lynn Thompson, Member  
Lynn Fairfax, Member  
Wanda Brooks, Member

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

## **Re: Columbus County's Early Voting Plan**

Dear Members of the Columbus County Board of Elections,

We write to address serious concerns with the proposal made by Chair McPherson-Edge in the Monday, May 11, 2026, meeting of the Columbus County Board of Elections (the "Board") to offer only a single early voting site for the 2026 general election. **If adopted, the proposal for a single early voting site would be an unprecedented and dramatic restriction on voting that would likely cause large-scale voter confusion and unduly burden the right to vote.** We therefore strongly recommend that the Board maintains 5 early voting sites as it did in 2022 and 2024.

### **1. Columbus County has consistently offered—and voters have consistently utilized—several early voting sites.**

Columbus County has consistently offered at least four early voting sites in its general elections for nearly two decades.<sup>1</sup> In the past two general elections (2022 and 2024), Columbus County offered five sites, and it is therefore likely voters in the county will be expecting several early voting options throughout the county. As consistency and accessibility significantly impact turnout, a reduction to just one early voting site will likely cause significant confusion and a disruption in voters' habits and plans to cast a ballot, resulting in diminished turnout in the county.

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://dl.ncsbe.gov/?prefix=One-Stop\\_Early\\_Voting/](https://dl.ncsbe.gov/?prefix=One-Stop_Early_Voting/) (Past early voting plans, indicating Columbus County had seven early voting sites in 2008, 2010 and 2012, six in 2014, 2016, four in 2018, eight in 2020, and five in the 2022 and 2024 general elections. These records also show that Columbus County has also offered weekend hours on Saturdays and Sundays in every election since 2020.).

Voter confusion and voting disruption is especially likely given the significant rate at which voters have utilized early voting sites throughout the county. And the rate of early voting has recently increased, from 52% of all county voters utilizing early voting in 2022 to 70% of all county voters in 2024. Notably, a majority of Columbus County's early voters in both 2022 and 2024 utilized sites *other than* the Board Office in Whiteville, *i.e.*, the early voting sites that Chair McPherson-Edge has proposed closing.<sup>2</sup> In other words, closing these other voting sites would be a disruption to the voting plan of most voters planning to vote early, and a significant portion of the voters likely casting a ballot this fall.

## 2. If early voting is reduced to one site in Whiteville, it will become more difficult to vote in Columbus County and wait times will skyrocket during peak hours.

At approximately 995 square miles, Columbus County is one of the largest in the state. Closing the early voting sites throughout the county will therefore create an enormous accessibility barrier to voters outside of Whiteville, especially those lacking reliable transportation.

As shown in the below figure, the county offered early voting sites in a variety of regions in the 2022 general election:



Eliminating these sites will result in enormous time and transportation burdens on the County's early voters. For example, if the Board closes the Ransom Event Center voting site (offered in both 2024 and 2022) in the easternmost part of the county, voters living near that site will have to drive an additional half hour one way to go into Whiteville – increasing their time to vote by an hour or more.

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<sup>2</sup> These figures were sourced from State Board of Election data files, accessible at [https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/ENRS/2022\\_11\\_08/absentee\\_20221108.zip](https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/ENRS/2022_11_08/absentee_20221108.zip) (2022 general election) and [https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/ENRS/2024\\_11\\_05/absentee\\_20241105.zip](https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/ENRS/2024_11_05/absentee_20241105.zip) (2024 general election).

A single voting site is also likely to dramatically increase wait times during peak hours during early voting and on election day. Those voters who are still able to vote will converge at the Board of Elections during peak hours. Others who are unable to make that drive but able to vote on election day will converge to their precincts on election day at rates unseen in recent elections. Together, increased travel and wait times mean that, for rural voters especially, early voting could go from taking minutes to hours if only one early voting site is offered.

And some voters will either be unable to present to vote at all, or will see the long lines and simply turn around. Many low wage, disabled, and other vulnerable voting communities living in rural areas do not have the time, transportation, or overall resources to take hours to cast a ballot. And for those voters that must work during the week, or who rely on family who have to work during the week for transportation, election day voting will not be an option. This action is therefore 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>3</sup> We urge the Board to think of these voters in choosing an early voting plan that ensures equal access for all of its eligible voters.

### **3. There is no legitimate reason for this severe restriction to early voting.**

Chair McPherson-Edge proposed a cut to early voting as a measure to save costs. But this is not a justifiable reason since Columbus County was allocated enough funding for five early voting sites. On June 1, 2026, the Columbus County Board of Commissioners approved a budget for Fiscal Year 2026–2027 which provides election funding consistent with what was needed for five sites in past elections.<sup>4</sup> Given that a majority of voters in the county use early voting, and a majority of early voters use sites other than the Board of Elections, this is an efficient and effective use of funding.

### **4. Mail-in voting is not an adequate substitute for early voting.**

Early voting allows voters to register or update their registration when they present to vote and allows them to show voter ID in person when they present to vote.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, mail-in voting requires voters to request a ballot in advance, to have two witnesses or a notary available to sign their application, requires them to provide a photo copy of their ID (unless they utilize the voter

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<sup>3</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>4</sup> See *Budget Worksheet: Fiscal Year 2026/2027*, Columbus County (June 1, 2026), <https://www.columbusco.org/sites/default/files/uploads/finance/approved-26-27-budget-06.01.26.pdf>. Upon information and believe, the Board requested and received funding specifically for 5 early voting sites in its budget.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-early-person>.

ID exception form), and then requires them to successfully deliver their ballot to the Board.<sup>6</sup> Any errors with these requirements could cause voters' mail-in ballot to be later rejected.

In addition to the practical hurdles with mail-in voting, recent funding issues at the United States Postal Service have caused rural service delays.<sup>7</sup> Since the grace period for mail-in ballots was eliminated in 2023,<sup>8</sup> and they must now be delivered by Election Day to count, mail deliverability delays can cause otherwise valid ballots to be rejected because they arrive late. These risks are not present when voters are able to vote in person.

While mail-in voting is an important option for some voters, it is not a substitute for the method preferred by a majority of Columbus County voters: early voting.

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

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>9</sup> While we understand there may be improper pressures on members to close or restrict early voting;<sup>10</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>11</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>12</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>13</sup> These publicly-stated goals appropriately align with legitimate state interests in ensuring free and fair elections for all North Carolinians.

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-mail/detailed-instructions-vote-mail> .

<sup>7</sup> See <https://prc.gov/postal-service-implements-nationwide-changes-mail-service> (“A higher percentage of rural areas are affected by mail slowdowns than non-rural areas.”).

<sup>8</sup> See Session Law 2023-140 at p. 27 (amending N.C.G.S. § 163-231(b)(1)), available at <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2023/Bills/Senate/PDF/S747v6.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-30.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://ncnewslines.com/2026/06/03/a-gop-county-elections-board-member-said-he-was-warned-against-voting-for-a-campus-polling-site/>.

<sup>11</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>12</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>13</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> .

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By contrast, the proposal to reduce Columbus County’s early voting to just one site threatens to cause “chaos” rather than “order” in the upcoming general election, presenting undue burden on voting without any legitimate state interest that may violate the First and Fourteenth Amendments.<sup>14</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 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

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<sup>14</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 policy of closing campus voting sites and creating travel burden on student voters in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments).