**Observation Report**

**Pender County Board of Elections**

**August 16, 2016 – 10:00 a.m.**

Gail Bromley, League member and Voter Services Chair, was present for this observation. The main reason for this meeting was to once again address an Early Voting Plan for the county for the General Election in 2016.

The meeting was well attended with representation of both political parties as well as others. There were only a few printed agendas and we all shared them as well as we could. Dennis asked Bettie Fennell, chairperson, to state why she asked for the public comment time to be put at the end of the agenda. Bettie announced that they were unlikely to change their minds based on public comments and didn’t need the disruption to the meeting. (not exact words, but paraphrased.) This was met by a lot of dissatisfaction on the part of those in attendance.

Vote and Vax was discussed. This outreach program takes place at County Departments of Health and reaches out to those who want to have their children vaccinated and vote on the same day. The Board of Elections in Pender decided to help the Health Department in this effort. A similar program exists in Brunswick County as well.

**Early Voting Plan:**

Before a plan was given, Dennis gave some statistics to note. Nearly 75% of the electorate in Pender County vote during Early Voting. Obviously, Early Voting is important to the residents who vote.

Dennis distributed a **Plan A** to all board members and again, very few copies were provided to those who were in attendance as observers. We shared the few copies available. Dennis had not given anyone, including board members, copies of this plan in advance. He had worked on presenting a little of what he had heard from each political party as wants and hoped that the additional hours and the one additional site from 2012 would please one side while no Sunday voting would please the other. He gave what he felt was a compromise plan that would pass, giving something to both sides. Twila of the majority moved to approve, but both Bettie and Barbara objected. Bettie felt it went too far in hours; Barbara felt it did not go far enough, especially for Sunday voting. Then Barbara, the minority member, tried to articulate her plan which would exclude Monday and add Sunday voting along with additional hours for working folks. This was voted down two to one. Then plan C came into play. That plan repeats the plan from 2012, with fewer sites and less weekend hours. This was clearly frustrating folks in the audience who felt that meant going backwards. That was voted two in favor and one against.

The audience continued to murmur their dissatisfaction with the Board members’ unwillingness to compromise. Dennis suggested that they have the public comments while they decided how to proceed.

I was first to speak. I scrapped my prepared remarks and commented on the partisanship I was seeing and hearing and how that was not serving the voters of the county. I urged the Board members to put the voters first and compromise. Others agreed and that agreement came from both parties. A clear message was being sent by the audience to the Board members to get a plan approved and compromise. Many spoke on the importance of weekend hours to those who commute major distances to work, often to other counties, and the need for helping others who lack transportation to get to the polls. After lots of discussion on precedent, etc., they went back to **Plan A**, and passed it unanimously. Attendees in the room stood up and most applauded.

The plan includes slightly different hours for more populated sites than for rural sites, with rural sites mainly allowing voting in the afternoon hours. It includes six sites, three more populated and three rural. The additional rural site (I believe) is Maple Hill. The total number of hours offered is 648. Two Saturdays are included with longer days on the last two Fridays, closing at 8:00 p.m.

This Board has met many times on Early Voting and until today, they have been at an impasse.

Submitted by: Gail F. Bromley