



CITY OF HOUSTON

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Mayor

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Dear Members of the Texas Senate,

I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on Senate Bill 1. You may recall my office strenuously opposed Senate Bill 7 from the 2021 regular session precisely because it limited the ability for Houstonians, and all Texans, to exercise their right to vote.

Having served in the Legislature for 27 years, I am well aware of partisan disagreements over public policy and the rhetoric that accompanies it. From time to time, I spoke from the House floor about my opposition to various bills and understand sometimes we simply agree to disagree.

But when legislation affects the ability of voters to elect their representatives, shouldn't the bar for this fundamental right be higher? In encouraging businesses and members of the public to oppose these restrictions, I was told by members of this body that none of the restrictions amounted to voter suppression, and that people should simply, "read the bill."

It is therefore puzzling to me how those same members were unable to answer how provisions targeting Sunday voting hours and lower standards for overturning elections were included in the bill's conference committee report. Given the emphatic defense of the bill, this would seem to be a question easily answered. My office, as well as many members of the press and public, hope to get an answer.

Instead, circumstances have led to another discussion regarding further restrictions. Let me say, if it was a bad idea the first time, chances are it's *still* a bad idea.

In reading SB 1, I see that it outlaws the popular "drive thru" voting that Harris County adopted and was used by more than 120,000 voters in 2020. This practice, which was approved by the Texas Secretary of State, simply allows qualified voters, operating under the same requirements as every other in-person voter, the convenience of casting the ballot from their car. From mothers with small children to caretakers with special needs patients, and to anyone concerned about indoor spaces during a pandemic, how does election security, or integrity, change whether a ballot is cast from a car seat to the inside of a building?

At the City of Houston, we've operated drive-through vaccination sites offering the exact same services as walk-in clinics, not to mention the thousands of pharmacies offering drive-up services. Fast food restaurants have been offering the same meals served inside their facility as they do in their drive-ups since 1947. Drive-through banking is a practice that dates back to the 1930's. So whether it is medicine, food, or money, it seems the practice of drive-through services isn't a debate, it is a practice.

The only change is one of convenience. If elected officials believe drive-through voting is too convenient, they should say so. But do not pretend that somehow there are any integrity concerns with the practice.

Additionally, SB 1 would restrict the hours of early voting to occur between 6am and 9pm for counties above 30,000 in population. This provision would outlaw the practice of “24 hour” early voting centers that Harris County ran in 2020, and again, that was approved in advance by the Texas Secretary of State. Offering services for 24 hours is a convenience to better serve the public. Businesses, from donut shops to Whataburger, understand that late night hours are sometimes the only times that work for the public.

Again, if lawmakers are against these expanded services, they should say so. They should explain to the shift workers, from law enforcement to medical teams, that voting hours convenient to their schedules will not be offered.

Finally, I wish to make special mention of the provisions in SB 1 that seek to add regulatory burdens to those assisting voters with disabilities. Gabe Cazares, the Director of the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, offered the following testimony on behalf of the more than 215,000 Houstonians with disabilities on SB 7:

Some members of our community need assistance at polling locations and this extra step will intimidate voters with disabilities and their direct support professionals. The threat of criminal penalties will make voters with disabilities second guess whether they should request help. This will lead to ballots not being cast correctly, causing Texans with disabilities votes to be thrown away.

Any restrictions on the voting rights of Texans with disabilities to cast their ballots should be coordinated with leaders in that community. Clearly, this has not happened with SB 1. Failing to solicit input from the disabled regarding laws directly affecting their ability to vote does nothing but diminish “integrity.”

It is not lost on me that changing access to voting is a political priority for leadership. Some leaders have argued that reforms are needed because people need to “feel elections are secure.” Elected leaders, who derive their authority to govern based off elections, have a higher responsibility to not undermine the “consent of the governed” by pushing claims of voter fraud without evidence.

On August 6, we will celebrate the 56th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Members of the Legislature would do well to remember how a Texan helped open the polls to all eligible voters. Remember that history will record whatever actions you take.

Sincerely,


Sylvester Turner
Mayor