

VIA EMAIL: janice.mackenzie@vancouver.ca

November 4, 2014

Janice MacKenzie
City Clerk and Chief Election Officer
3rd Floor, City Hall
453 W 12th Ave
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4

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Re: Advance voting locations – 2014 Municipal Election

Dear Ms. MacKenzie,

The British Columbia Civil Liberties Association is extremely concerned by the lack of advance voting locations in Vancouver's northeastern neighbourhoods, specifically the Downtown Eastside and Grandview-Woodlands. We are concerned about the discriminatory effect of the absence of advance polls in these neighbourhoods on individuals whose participation in democratic and political processes is already limited by other factors.

We understand that there are certain physical requirements that limit the sort of venues that can host advance voting (room size, electrical outlets, parking, accessibility, secure internet, and so on). We find it difficult to believe that a venue with all the requisite characteristics does not exist anywhere in the Downtown Eastside or in Grandview-Woodlands, especially given the presence of Election Day polling places in both of these areas.

We are also aware that the eight 2014 advance polling locations were secured over one year ago. We do not consider this to be a valid reason to remain unresponsive to community concerns about them now. The necessity of an advance polling location in this part of the city should have been as obvious to your office one year ago as it is to us today. By not making arrangements for advance polling locations in these areas the city has failed to equitably serve the people in these communities by facilitating their participation in the way that the city facilitates the participation of people in other neighbourhoods.

The *Charter* guarantees every Canadian citizen the right to vote; the exercise of this right is the primary means by which our fundamental equality is manifest in our political process. In order for this democratic ideal to be realized, we must not only defend the right to vote but ensure that citizens have equal

opportunity to exercise this right. As the Chief Election Officer, it behooves you to work toward dismantling the barriers that keep marginalized people from exercising their democratic rights as freely as those who are not marginalized or who live in other areas of the city.

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The neighbourhoods that lack advance voting locations are some of the city's poorest areas. The citizens who reside in these areas are precisely those who are the least able to adapt to the lack of advance polling opportunities proximate to their residences and workplaces. Those living on low incomes are more likely than their higher income peers to face significant barriers to voting on Election Day. They are more likely to be uncomfortable requesting time off from work to vote, and there is a disproportionately high chance that they may have their work hours rescheduled on short notice. For those who are primary caregivers to children, particularly single parents, the sporadic availability of childcare may unpredictably limit where and how they are able to cast their vote.

These low income Vancouverites are also less readily able to transport themselves significant distances to vote. Many citizens in these neighbourhoods do not own vehicles; for others, taking public transit presents a significant financial burden. Higher than average numbers of people in these community have physical limitations that makes travelling even modest distances difficult, and these same limitations may make waiting in Election Day lines challenging. For those who can afford to take public transit or are physically fit enough to walk, the time required to do so may interfere with employment or childcare.

The areas lacking advance polling places are also neighbourhoods with a high percentage of people experiencing mental illness, addiction, or disability; an expanded range of voting times are integral to the enfranchisement of these citizens. Many people in this group live with highly unpredictable levels of physical and mental well-being, and must plan their lives around having 'good days' and 'bad days'. They may also struggle with travelling long distances to advance polling places. If we are to take seriously the right of these citizens to have meaningful opportunities to cast their votes, they must have ready access to convenient advance polling options.

Indigenous people reside in the Downtown Eastside and Grandview-Woodlands in significantly higher than average numbers. Canada's shameful history of legal disenfranchisement of these communities, combined with the ongoing legacy and reality of colonization and racial discrimination make it imperative that special care is taken not to organize our electoral process in

such a way that disenfranchises Indigenous people further. Save for the Musqueam Indian Reserve, the Downtown Eastside and Grandview-Woodlands have the highest concentration of Indigenous people in all of Vancouver. The area bordered by Clark Drive to the west, Victoria Drive to the east, Venables Street to the south and the Burrard Inlet to the north, for example, had a population that was 20.6% Indigenous in 2006, compared to the Metro average of 2.8%.¹ From the heart of this area at East Hastings Street and Commercial Drive, it takes nearly one hour each way for an able-bodied adult to walk to the advance polling location at the Roundhouse Community Centre, and slightly longer to walk to the Thunderbird Community Centre. A round trip on the bus takes over an hour to either advance polling location, without even factoring in the time it takes to actually cast one's vote. The injustice of organizing voting in ways that disproportionately impact particular racial communities should require no further explanation.

It is highly problematic that your office's decision will significantly constrain the voting options of the city's most marginalized citizens. The failure to address this situation - which is not a new situation in Vancouver elections - does no service to the integrity of our municipal election process. The location of Vancouver's 2014 advance voting locations will effectively make voting more difficult for exactly the community of Canadians who we should be actively working to meaningfully enfranchise. In our democracy, the voices of citizens who are low income, who are single parents, who are physically disabled, who live with mental illness and who are Indigenous *cannot* be less valued, or heard less loudly, than the voices of their more affluent peers or those who happen to live in other neighbourhoods.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josh Paterson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Josh Paterson, *Executive Director*

¹<http://www.vancouversun.com/ethnicity/Vancouver+maps+ethnic+makeup+Metro+Vancouver+interactive/5553001/story.html>