

January 9, 2026

To: North Carolina State Board of Elections
Chair, Francis X. De Luca
Secretary, Stacy "Four" Eggers IV
Member, Jeff Carmon
Member, Siobhan O'Duffy Millen
Member, Robert Rucho

Re: Non-Unanimous One-Stop / Early Voting Plan — Madison County, March 2026 Primary

We are Brian Ball, Secretary and Debbie Ponder, Member and we serve on the Madison County Board of Elections. We submit this letter in connection with the non-unanimous one-stop/early voting plan for the March 2026 primary election. Because the County Board did not adopt a unanimous plan, the matter is now before the State Board for selection.

We respectfully request that the State Board adopt the Minority Plan for Madison County for the March 2026 primary election.

The competing plans differ primarily in the number and geographic distribution of early voting sites: the Minority Plan maintains three sites (one in each municipality), while the majority plan reduces early voting to a single site at Madison AB Tech in Marshall.

The Minority Plan maintains three early voting locations, strategically placed in each of Madison County's three municipalities: Marshall (Madison AB Tech), Hot Springs (Senior Center), and Mars Hill (Library). The alternative plan reduces early voting to a single location at Madison AB Tech in Marshall.

Madison County is large, rural, and mountainous. Reducing early voting from three sites to one would require many voters to travel substantially farther—often outside their immediate community—to access early voting, creating a predictable hardship for voters with transportation constraints and time-limited work and caregiving schedules.

Testimony presented to the Madison County Board indicated that voters from the Spring Creek precinct could face travel times exceeding one hour and fifteen minutes to reach the Madison AB Tech site in Marshall if that were the only early voting location. A travel burden of this magnitude is likely to depress participation among affected voters.

Concentrating early voting into a single location can shift demand to Election Day precincts and increase congestion countywide. Maintaining three early voting sites reduces this downstream pressure and supports orderly administration across both the early voting period and Election Day. Lessening the burden on Election Day administrators will also help our staff of two (2) meet the new demands imposed by the earlier deadline for processing provisional and absentee ballots. |

While Madison AB Tech is located on a main highway, the available room is small, which limits the number of voting machines and the safe throughput of voters. If Madison AB Tech is the sole early voting site, the County should expect longer lines at that site and, correspondingly, a greater risk that some voters will forgo voting due to time and travel constraints. The line will lead outside the rear of the building, and this can be a discouragement for voters as well.

The Madison County Board of Elections unanimously approved and submitted a budget to the County Commissioners that included the costs of operating three early voting sites, and the County Commissioners approved that budget request. Madison County also has sufficient experienced professional staff to operate three sites, as demonstrated in prior elections (including 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024).

Madison County has a history of supporting multiple early voting sites in non-presidential elections. Three sites were used in 2010, 2018, and 2022, and five sites were available in 2014. This precedent reflects both operational capability and local expectations regarding geographic access to early voting.

A significant number of Madison County residents have expressed opposition to reducing early voting locations. Both the Board of Elections and the Board of Commissioners have received public comments supporting retention of multiple sites, and local press coverage has documented public concern regarding the hardship created by a reduction from three sites to one (including coverage titled "Board of Elections Votes to Scrap 2 Early Voting Sites Starting in '26" (Citizen Times, 10/30/2025) **EXHIBIT 1** and "Scrapping Madison County Early Voting Sites Creates Hardship" (Citizen Times, 11/18/2025)). **EXHIBIT 2**

Madison County voters deserve an early voting plan that supports meaningful participation without imposing undue travel burdens. The Minority Plan—maintaining three early voting sites consistent with many years' practice—best meets the needs of county voters and is supported by prior budgeting, staff readiness, historical practice, and community input.

For the reasons above, we respectfully request that the State Board adopt the Minority Plan for Madison County for the March 2026 primary election.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian Ball

Secretary, Madison County Board of Elections

Cell 828-712-3784

Debbie Ponder

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MADISON

Madison County Board of Elections votes to scrap 2 early voting sites beginning in '26



Johnny Casey

Asheville Citizen Times

Updated Oct. 30, 2025, 9:53 a.m. ET

Key Points AI-assisted summary

Proponents of the change cite cost savings and low turnout at some locations as the primary reasons for the reduction.

Opponents argue that a single site will create a hardship for voters in the large county and could suppress turnout.

The Republican-majority plan and the Democratic-minority plan will both be submitted to the state board of elections for a final decision.

MARSHALL - Residents are voicing concerns after the Madison County Board of Elections voted to scrap two early voting sites beginning with the primary election in March 2026.

The five-member board is composed of three Republicans: Chair Dyatt Smathers, Ray Lewis and Robert Briggs, and two Democrats: Secretary Brian Ball and Debbie Ponder.

The board voted 3-2 in its Oct. 14 meeting to reduce the number of early voting sites from three to one beginning in March.

Smathers, Lewis and Briggs voted to approve the motion to reduce the number of sites, while Ball and Ponder voted against the motion.

According to North Carolina General Statute, each county board of elections must submit a plan to the state board of elections for each election year. Any unanimous plan is approved by the state board. Any contested plan must go before the state board, with the majority plan and minority plans.

The state can then choose to adopt the majority plan or the minority plan, or to adopt its own plan for the county.

In the next step, the majority members and the minority members from the Madison County Board of Elections will need to each submit a plan to the state by Dec. 5, according to Smathers.

He said his main motivation for reducing the number of early voting sites was to cut costs, adding that another aspect of the majority plan was to include additional operating days at the one proposed early voting site, at the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College's Madison campus in Marshall.

"If you've got three sites, at minimum you have to have five people — a chief judge, two judges, one from each party — and you have to have a minimum of two workers, and we usually have three," Smathers said. "So you're talking about six people."

Low turnout a factor

Smathers cited lower turnout, particularly at the Hot Springs location in 2022, as another motivating factor, adding that turnout is typically lower during midterm elections as compared to presidential election years.

In the 2022 midterm elections, the county used a Beech Glen site in Mars Hill, A-B Tech's Madison campus in Marshall and the Hot Springs Community Center as its three early voting sites.

Smathers pointed to having to pay poll workers at these sites to work overtime hours, requiring the county to pay extra.

"The biggest expense to all this, of course, is your labor, with the machines, the ballots, everything that is ancillary to that, including hauling the equipment to the site and bringing the equipment back, paying mileage to the chief judge to bring up the stuff every day," Smathers said.

Ball said three early voting sites are needed in the county.

"It is a very big county. Certainly, there are a lot of people in Mars Hill and Beech Glen area, as well as Hot Springs with the bridge issues that they have, and delays that they face," Ball said. "I think it's a hardship for them to come to one site at A-B Tech."

Ball said the county board of elections submits budgets to the Madison County Board of Commissioners, which had already approved the board's budget, including funding for three sites.

"They may feel like they can save money and be able to reduce that for the county, and I understand that, but I've got real concerns about just having one site, with that location at A-B Tech. The location is good, but the room is very small. You can only have so much equipment in that room. You could run into issues with lines."

Smathers has served on the Madison County Board of Elections since 2011, and Ball since 2018.

Ball said the county has operated three early voting sites for as long as he can remember.

"There are administrative efficiencies with operating one site," Ball said. "But our obligation is to the voters. And I feel strongly that we should do everything in our power to make it as easy to vote as possible."

Further impact on turnout?

Smathers said the state requires only one early voting site for every 30,000 voters.

This requirement was mandated by S.L. 2024-52 and applied only to the November 2024 election in 13 Western North Carolina counties that were severely impacted by Tropical Storm Helene.

Ball and others have raised the issue of the potential for lower voter turnout in 2026 as a consequence of the fewer sites.

But Smathers said that voter suppression was never the intention.

"It has everything to do with serving the public as best we can," Smathers said.

In the 2022 midterm elections, there were 4,323 Election Day voters; 5,545 early voters; 299 absentee voters; and 48 provisional voters, according to the state board of elections. In the 2022 midterms, there were more than 17,300 registered voters in Madison County.

As of Oct. 25, there were 17,400 registered voters in Madison County, according to the North Carolina State Board of Elections.

Ball said he worried that having one early voting site would impact voter turnout.

"To me, convenience matters. Early voting has now become the most popular form of voting, then Election Day voting," he said.

Smathers said the number of absentee voters continues to rise, and urged voters to consider that method, from "the comfort of their home."

Smathers said the number of early voting sites for future elections was not set in stone.

"I want to see if this works," Smathers said. "I want to see if our site is adequate. I want to see what the turnout is, and then we'll make a decision about November 2026."

More: Hot Springs candidates speak on Helene recovery, most important issues in public forum

More: Madison County commissioners hear updates on Helene-impacted projects

Johnny Casey is the Madison County communities reporter for The Citizen Times and The News-Record & Sentinel. He can be reached at 828-210-6074 or jcasey@citizentimes.com.

Minority Exhibit - 2

MADISON

Madison County residents: Scrapping early voting sites harms democratic process



Johnny Casey

Asheville Citizen Times

Nov. 18, 2025, 4:57 p.m. ET

According to North Carolina General Statute, each county board of elections must submit a plan to the state board of elections for each election year. Any unanimous plan is approved by the state board. Any contested plan must go before the state board, with the majority plan and minority plans.

The state can then choose to adopt the majority plan or the minority plan, or to adopt its own plan for the county.

In the next step, the majority members and the minority members from the Madison County Board of Elections will need to each submit a plan to the state by Dec. 5, according to Smathers.

Board of Elections Director Jacob Ray said while the plans have been drafted, they have not been sent to the state.

Smathers told The News-Record his main motivation for reducing the number of early voting sites was to cut costs, adding that the majority plan was to include additional operating days on Saturdays at the one proposed early voting site, at the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College's Madison campus in Marshall.

Smathers said the costs would go to purchasing new voting machines.

"If you've got three sites, at minimum you have to have five people — a chief judge, two judges, one from each party — and you have to have a minimum of two workers, and we usually have three," Smathers said. "So you're talking about six people."

One site is a 'hardship'

But Ball said three early voting sites are needed in the county.

"It is a very big county. Certainly, there are a lot of people in Mars Hill and Beech Glen area, as well as Hot Springs with the bridge issues that they have, and delays that they face," Ball said. "I think it's a hardship for them to come to one site at A-B Tech."

Ball also said the county board of elections submits budgets to the Madison County Board of Commissioners, which had already approved the board's budget, including funding for three sites.

At the board of elections' Nov. 14 meeting, 10 residents spoke during public comment, nearly all of whom voiced their disapproval of the board's decision to provide only one early voting site.

At the Madison County Board of Commissioners' Nov. 17 meeting, more people showed out to voice their disapproval again, as 17 residents signed up to speak.

Bryan Lyles, 75, who lives in North Marshall, said he felt the decision would disenfranchise residents.

"There isn't an 'as the crow flies' in Madison County," Lyles told The News-Record. "It's an hour-and-a-half from Spring Creek over to Marshall. If you go up to Ebbs Chapel, it probably also is a good 40 minutes over to Marshall."

Lyles said he has "fallen in love" with Madison County, where he has lived for 11 years, and its sense of community.

"When I take visitors and drive them around the county to try and explain what makes Madison County unique, it's a long drive," he said. "Disenfranchising people, even if it's a small number of people, runs counter to our idea of democracy."

Burton Fink, the Spring Creek precinct chair for the Madison County Democratic Party, and others said they disagreed with the election board's decision to vote in its Oct. 14 meeting prior to hearing any public comments.

"That's extremely disturbing," Fink said, adding that the board of commissioners offered public comment before its July 8 meeting in which it voted against taking control of the county board of health.

But according to Smathers, who has served on the board since 2011, the board has reserved public comments for the end of meetings for as long as he's served on the board.

Absentee voting

Smathers said the number of absentee voters continues to rise, and urged voters to consider that method, from "the comfort of their home."

In the 2022 midterm elections, there were 4,323 Election Day voters; 5,545 early voters; 299 absentee voters; and 48 provisional voters, according to the state board of elections. In the 2022 midterms, there were more than 17,300 registered voters in Madison County.

As of Oct. 25, there were 17,400 registered voters in Madison County, according to the North Carolina State Board of Elections.

In the 2024 primary election, there were 2,920 Election Day voters; 1,524 early voters and 50 absentee voters.

For the 2024 general election, there were 9,978 early voters compared to 3,232 Election Day voters and 460 absentee voters.

But for Mars Hill resident Claire Gillespie, 79, there are setbacks to absentee voting, as well.

"We don't even have a post office in Marshall anymore," Gillespie told The News-Record.

Gillespie, who worked 24 years in Madison County Schools, pointed to the recent Hot Springs Town Board elections results as reason for the importance of voting opportunities.

Wendy Stancil defeated Andrew Thomas by four votes in the election, as Lisa Gahagan, Tammy Shelton and Stancil were elected for the three-member town board.

"My thinking is that if there had been only one voting site, that probably a different person might have won," Gillespie said. "Four votes is a very small number."

More: Hot Springs Town Board gets 2 new members after tight race

More: Hot Springs Town Board gets 2 new members after tight race

More: After blowback, Madison County commissioners vote to not take control of health board

Johnny Casey is the Madison County communities reporter for The Citizen Times and The News-Record & Sentinel. He can be reached at 828-210-6074 or jcasey@citizentimes.com.