

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 263

(Chair, Government, Labor, and Elections
Committee)(By Request - Departmental - State Board of
Elections)

Government, Labor, and Elections

Election Law - Early Voting Centers - Bus Stops

This departmental bill requires that – if an early voting center is located within one-half mile of a fixed local bus route – each bus operating on that route must, to the maximum extent practicable and consistent with accessibility requirements, allow passengers to embark and disembark at the entrance of the early voting center on the days the center is open for voting. The bill applies only to a fixed local bus route funded by a county or municipality and operated by the county or municipality or a contractor for the county or municipality. The bill does not apply to (1) an express or commuter bus route that has limited stops between its origin and destination; (2) a bus route operated by the Maryland Transit Administration; or (3) a bus route operated by Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. **The bill takes effect January 1, 2027.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill does not directly affect State finances.

Local Effect: Local government finances are expected to be affected in at least some jurisdictions, beginning in FY 2028, as discussed below. **This bill imposes a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: The State Board of Elections (SBE) has determined that this bill has minimal or no impact on small business (attached). The Department of Legislative Services concurs with this assessment.

Analysis

Current Law: The number of required early voting centers in a county is based on the number of registered voters in the county, ranging from one early voting center in a county with fewer than 50,000 registered voters to 13 early voting centers in a county with at least 600,000 registered voters. In addition to the required early voting centers, each county may establish one additional center if the local board of elections and the governing body of the county agree to establish an additional center and SBE approves the establishment of the center. Early voting centers are open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. from the second Thursday before a primary or general election through the Thursday before the election.

At least seven months before each statewide primary election, each local board of elections must submit an election plan to SBE for approval that includes an early voting center plan, a polling place plan, a ballot drop box plan, and an analysis of how to maximize voter participation in the county and each precinct.

An early voting center plan must use the following factors when determining the location of an early voting center in the county:

- accessibility of the early voting center to historically disenfranchised communities, including cultural groups, ethnic groups, and minority groups;
- proximity of the early voting center to dense concentrations of voters;
- accessibility of the early voting center by public transportation;
- for counties with four or more early voting centers, ensuring equitable geographic distribution of early voting centers throughout the county; and
- the use of community centers and public gathering places.

Background: For the 2024 primary and general elections, 97 early voting centers were made available statewide for voters to cast their ballots in person. SBE indicates that use of early voting centers has been growing in recent elections, and the centers are far more limited in number than Election Day polling places making it more likely that voters do not live at walkable distances from their nearest early voting location. The bill is intended to help make early voting centers more accessible to voters.

Local Fiscal Effect: Local government finances are expected to be affected in at least some jurisdictions, beginning in fiscal 2028 (accounting for the bill's January 1, 2027 effective date) due to the deviation of fixed local bus routes to early voting centers within one-half mile of a route over the course of the eight days of early voting each fiscal year.

The extent of the impact cannot be reliably estimated at this time, in part due to uncertainty of how local governments will interpret the bill's qualifying language that the buses on fixed local bus routes within one-half mile of an early voting center allow for embarking

and disembarking at the center entrance *to the maximum extent practicable*. Modification of existing bus routes during the early voting period may result in:

- increased costs of operating the buses due to additional distance added to the route;
- costs of communicating changes to bus routes and schedules to the public; and
- costs to temporarily identify/designate specific bus stop locations in front of early voting centers and ensure the locations meet accessibility requirements.

Any increase in expenditures may be offset, at least to some extent, by increased fare revenue from deviated routes during early voting (if the bus is not a free service) to the extent that additional individuals use the bus routes in order to reach early voting centers as a result of the route deviations.

For *illustrative purposes*, Prince George’s County indicates that its expenditures increase by at least \$37,300 in fiscal 2028, consisting of \$25,750 in additional costs for its contracted bus services due to additional operating time and mileage resulting from route deviations and \$11,550 for temporary signage and associated site-specific improvements at the bus stop locations in front of early voting centers. Prince George’s County provides fare-free bus service; therefore, its revenues are not affected.

This estimate assumes that the bill does not require expansion of service hours of bus routes in order to provide service throughout early voting hours.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: SB 100 (Chair, Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee)(By Request - Departmental - State Board of Elections) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Baltimore City; Anne Arundel, Calvert, Frederick, Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George’s counties; City of Frederick; Maryland Municipal League; Maryland State Board of Elections; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 2, 2026
sj/sdk

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ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC IMPACT ON SMALL BUSINESSES

TITLE OF BILL: Election Law - Early Voting Centers - Bus Stops

BILL NUMBER: HB 263

PREPARED BY: State Board of Elections

PART A. ECONOMIC IMPACT RATING

This agency estimates that the proposed bill:

WILL HAVE MINIMAL OR NO ECONOMIC IMPACT ON
MARYLAND SMALL BUSINESS

OR

WILL HAVE MEANINGFUL ECONOMIC IMPACT ON MARYLAND
SMALL BUSINESSES

PART B. ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS

Small businesses have not been and are not expected to be significant users of or competitors with public bus services. Therefore, modest changes to those services will have minimal or no impact on small businesses.