

No Siler City Early Voting Site for 2017 Municipal Elections

By Randy Voller

Access to the ballot box is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. As our lives have become more complicated and more people have moved into our communities the ability to access early voting is a key to increasing participation from voters at the ballot box and ensuring an inclusive and vibrant local democracy.

Chatham County can be rightfully proud of our county-wide voter turnout. We've topped the state over the past decade. We led North Carolina once again during the 2016 election with a turnout of 78.1 percent of our registered voters.

The Chatham County Board of Elections has done an excellent job to encourage voting and their stewardship combined with the prevalent community spirit in Chatham County have yielded these impressive results.

And despite national trends that indicate increasingly lower turnouts in local elections over the past 17 years, the Chatham-wide democratic spirit has crossed over to influence our off-year municipal elections as well. In Pittsboro, voter turnout has consistently exceeded regional and national trends as the community has embraced the ease of voting at a conveniently located early voting site.

Unfortunately, Siler City has not secured a local early voting site for its municipal elections and therefore its participation lags behind Pittsboro's.

Here are the turnout results for the last three municipal elections for Pittsboro (PITT) and Siler City (SC):

- 2011 turnout: 36.90 percent (PITT) and 21.1 percent (SC)
- 2013 turnout: 26.78 percent (PITT) and 20.0 percent (SC)
- 2015 turnout: 31.40 percent (PITT) and 19.1 percent (SC)

There are many variables that may contribute to this disparity, but the availability of a convenient and easy-to-use early voting site in Siler City for its municipal elections is a likely factor in the difference/variance in turnout. Currently, Siler City voters have to drive at least 16 miles one-way to Pittsboro to vote early at the Chatham County Board of Elections, while Pittsboro voters can easily access the same early voting site at

984 Thompson Street in Pittsboro.

This extra drive time and the associated costs likely have had an effect on the ability of Siler City voters to conveniently and easily access the ballot box. Not only does the extra distance cost more in gas, but the drive time ensures that the effort to vote early will likely take more than an hour and perhaps as much as two hours to accomplish.

So unless an effort is made to pick up and ferry voters across the county to the polls, the turnout in early voting for Siler City's municipal elections will likely be dismal.

And the data proves it.

Below are the early voting results for the last three elections for Pittsboro (PITT) and Siler City (SC). (The percentages indicate the percent of voters who chose to vote early)

- 2011 early voter turnout: 40.98 percent (PITT) and 3.02 percent (SC)
- 2013 early voter turnout: 36.52 percent (PITT) and 3.52 percent (SC)
- 2015 early voter turnout: 45.93 percent (PITT) and 10.56 percent (SC)

The uptick in 2015 can most likely be attributed to the efforts of East Siler City Precinct Chairman, Jesse Scotton (D), who ferried voters across the county to the polls in Pittsboro for Albert Reddick (D) in 2015 when Reddick challenged incumbent Mayor John Grimes (R) and lost by eight votes.

The outcome was significant because had Reddick prevailed, he would have been the first African-American Mayor ever elected to serve as a Mayor for any of the municipalities in Chatham County's 246 year history.

In July of 2017, Lou Forrissi (D) and Franklin Gomez Flores (U), filed to challenge three term incumbent Siler City commissioner Cindy Bray (D) for an at-large seat to the board and Forrissi immediately addressed the Town Commissioners about securing an early voting site in Siler City for the municipal elections of 2017.

Forrissi said that "our citizens should not be required to make a round trip of nearly 34 miles in the car in order to cast their vote during the early voting period" and that a local early voting site would "make it easier and less expensive for all citizens to vote in our municipal elections"

On August 21st the Siler City Town Board took up the issue with a number of people gathered in the audience who were interested in the topic. Five of the six public speakers spoke in favor of adding an early voting site at the Earl B. Fitts Center in Siler City for the fall 2017 election, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

The Town Board was not convinced and although the Chatham County Democratic Party offered to reimburse Siler City for the estimated cost of \$4,300 for one week of early voting the offer was refused.

One pointed comment made by a Town Board member was that the Democratic Party's generous offer to help the citizens of Siler City secure an early voting site "amounted to pay for play".

Given that the Town Board has the power itself to request an early voting site, has the power to fund its cost and the power to ensure that the citizens have convenient access to the ballot box, the only "play" that evening was the board's unwillingness to make it easier for its citizens to participate in its local elections.

After the spirited discussion and impassioned input from candidate Reddick, who questioned how some of the Town Board members who support the NAACP could be against securing an early voting site, the board tabled the matter until it could receive more input from the Board of Elections.

Since the Town Board knew that the Board of Elections had a deadline for action and needed a request from Siler City for an early voting site for its official meeting the following evening, the delay by the Town Board effectively killed the opportunity to add an early voting site for its 2017 municipal elections.

The Chatham County Democratic Party voiced its displeasure with the inaction by asking in a post on its Facebook site "what kind of American opposes making voting easier and more convenient?" and why would the Siler City leadership "rather have their citizens drive to Pittsboro to vote early—or not vote early at all—than have its own early voting site in Siler City?"

These are good questions since 73 percent of Siler City voters used early voting in 2016, while less than 11 percent of the voters used the early voting option during the municipal

elections of 2015.

(The County administers the sites and pays for early voting during Presidential and off-year congressional elections such as 2010 and 2014, while municipalities like Siler City and Pittsboro are financially responsible for their elections and by law must reimburse the County Board of Elections for the cost of administering an election.)

After the dust settled, Siler City called a special meeting for Thursday, August 24th to discuss early voting. The news sparked some excitement that perhaps the Town would secure an early voting site in Siler City after all for the 2017 municipal election.

Unfortunately the meeting featured some good ol' fashioned political theater which was supplemented by old school political oratory and stem winding. The result was a 6-1 decision by Town leaders against an early voting site for 2017 and an agreement by the Town Board to pursue the early voting option in its future budgets.

Perhaps half a loaf is better than no loaf, but the result for 2017 speaks volumes.

Before the Town Board meeting the hope was that the special meeting would send a clear and coherent message to Siler City residents that the Town wants to increase participation in its democratic process and thus ensure that participation at the ballot box is convenient for all of its voters.

After the meeting there was disappointment about 2017, but hope for 2019.

The bottom line is that an inclusive Siler City is a prosperous Siler City and a prosperous Siler City is good for Chatham County and the region.

And one method for achieving inclusivity and thus greater prosperity is to increase participation of citizens in the democratic process during all elections—especially the local municipal elections—where the citizens are most likely to encounter their elected officials and be more directly affected by public policy and governing decisions.

Randy Voller is the former Mayor of Pittsboro, a consultant, business owner and Democratic/progressive political activist. He served as delegate for Bernie Sanders at the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

Chatham Joins Nationwide Grade-Level Reading Campaign

Three North Carolina communities are taking on one of the most significant crises facing the state – the majority of our young children are not proficient in reading. Chatham, Durham and Rowan counties are joining the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) with more than 300 communities across the nation to increase early reading proficiency. Chatham Reads, Durham's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and Ready, Set, Read... ROWAN! support strategies beginning at birth that will put children on a pathway to grade-level reading by the end of third grade, the single greatest predictor of future academic and career success.

"Sixty-seven percent of jobs by 2020 will require some post-secondary education, yet today only 42 percent of the workforce possess that level of education. Early reading proficiency is critical to our children's academic and career success. Communities investing in early learning are investing in their communities' economy," said Lisa Finaldi, Community Engagement Leader for the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation.

The CGLR mobilizes funders, nonprofit partners, business leaders, government agencies, states and communities across the nation to ensure that many more children succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. Chatham Reads, Durham's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and Ready, Set, Read... ROWAN! join six other CGLR communities in North Carolina – Gaston, Mecklenburg, Moore, Nash/Edgecombe, Wake and Wayne.

Only 38 percent of North Carolina fourth graders and 25 percent of students from economically disadvantaged families scored at or above reading proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2015. Reading in the early grades predicts high school and later success. Those who read well go on to graduate, but those who are not reading well by the end of third grade, are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

"Chatham County has so many inspiring and remarkable organizations aligned to focus on the importance of early literacy. Supporting our children to read on grade-level by the end of third grade is truly a community effort. We are engaging families, local businesses, non-profit organizations and community leaders in this endeavor," said Krista Millard, Program Coordinator for Chatham Reads.

"Rowan County has a rich history of excellence and perseverance, and our community is working together to ensure our children have a strong foundation for learning. Because the future growth and productivity of our local economy depends upon the success of our children, our number one priority is to engage parents and to help prepare our children to read on grade level by the end of third grade," said Leah Ann Honeycutt, Program Coordinator for Ready, Set, Read...ROWAN!

In North Carolina, the Campaign is led by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF). Membership in the Campaign provides communities' access to experts focused

on early literacy, support in addressing challenges that keep many children from learning to read, and opportunities to share and learn best practices from communities across NC and the nation.

The Campaign addresses three underlying challenges that can keep young children, especially those from low-income families, from learning to read proficiently:

- School readiness — too many children are entering kindergarten already behind
- School attendance — too many young children are missing too many days of school
- Summer learning — too many children are losing ground academically over the summer

ABOUT NCECF

NCECF builds public will by advancing understanding of birth-through-eight child development and promotes practice and policy solutions that drive aligned action to support each child being on a pathway to grade-level reading. Learn more at www.buildthefoundation.org and www.gradelevelreading.net.

Like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/buildthefoundation. Subscribe to our YouTube Channel at www.youtube.com/buildthefoundation. Follow us on Twitter at [@ncecf](https://twitter.com/ncecf) and [@tracyzimmerman](https://twitter.com/tracyzimmerman). Follow us on LinkedIn at linkedin.com/north-carolina-early-childhood-foundation.

Chatham County Line necesita noticias bilingües de la comunidad Hispano de Chatham

Buscamos artículos y noticias de acontecimientos en español e inglés. Fotos son bienvenidas también, con información en ambas lenguas. Mandarlos por email a editor@chathamcountyline.org

Chatham County Line needs bilingual news from Chatham's Hispanic Community

We need articles and press releases in Spanish and English. Photos are welcome also, with caption information in both languages. Email them to editor@chathamcountyline.org