

Iberia Parish Council
 c/o Clerk of the Council Brenda P. Bergeron
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Submitted via email

September 15, 2021

Dear Members of the Iberia Parish Council:

We write to urge you to make every effort to ensure recent polling place closures are not sustained for future elections and to support the addition of an early voting site in Iberia Parish for the remaining 2021 elections. As you know, there will be a statewide election on November 13, 2021 to vote on amendments to the Louisiana Constitution and local offices, including City Marshal for New Iberia City Court. We are aware that the Parish purportedly does not plan to make recent polling place closures permanent.¹ However, the current closures, even if temporary, will adversely affect voters for the upcoming elections. Moreover, the number of polling places that have been closed in predominantly Black neighborhoods in the Parish is highly concerning.

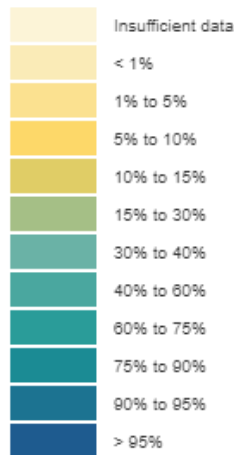
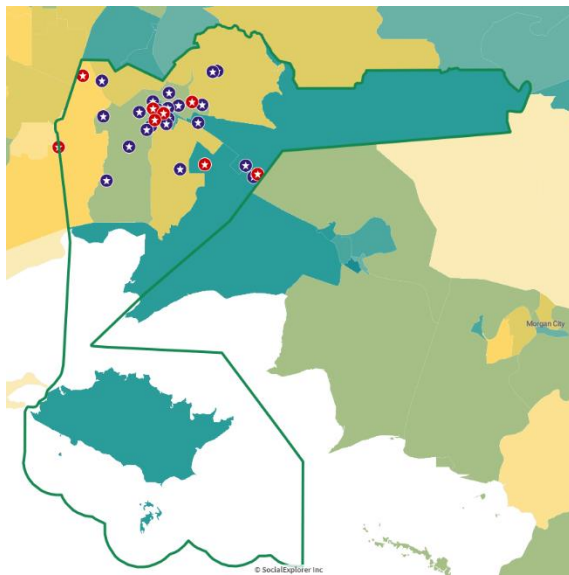
In this letter, we explain how the polling places changes for the upcoming November 2021 election will disproportionately impact voters of color. We then outline several questions to which voters deserve answers.

¹ Renee Allen, *Questions remain after Iberia Parish Council votes to cut back on voting locations*, KLFY (Aug. 3, 2021), <https://www.klfy.com/iberia-parish/questions-remain-after-iberia-parish-council-votes-to-cuts-back-on-voting-locations/>

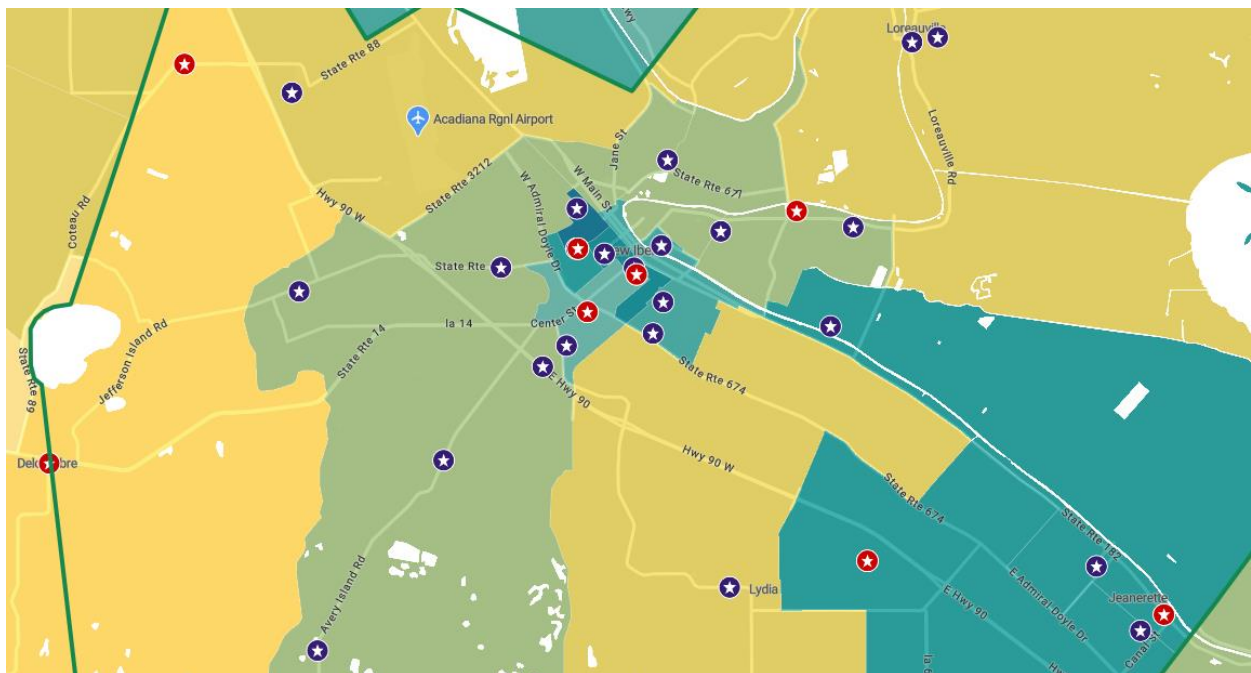
I. The Closures Disproportionately Burden Black Voters

This Council has chosen to close eight polling place locations in Iberia Parish. However, nearly every polling location that will be closed is located in a predominantly Black neighborhood. In fact, only three of the eight closed locations are *not* in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

The following maps show the location of every polling place that will be available for the November 2021 election, marked by a dark purple star. The locations that will be closed for the November elections are marked by a red star:



The map to the left depicts all polling places in Iberia Parish. Sites available prior to recent closures are marked in dark purple. Recently closed sites are marked with a red star. A larger map zooming in on these sites is provided below. Both maps depict the “Black or African American Alone” population by Census Tract as reported in the 2019 American Community Survey.



Source: Maps created with 2019 ACS Data supplied by Social Explorer.

As the map shows, there is a high number of polling place closures in neighborhoods that are at least 30% Black, according to the Census Bureau data. Moreover, according to data supplied publicly by the Secretary of State, half of these polling places closures are comprised of a higher percentage of Black registered voters than the overall percentage of registered Black voters in Iberia Parish (32.6 %)²:

<i>Closed Polling Locations</i>	<i>Total Registered Voters (as of June 2021)</i>	<i>Percent Black</i>	<i>Percent White</i>
<i>Pesson Elementary School</i>	459	50%	46%
<i>St Francis Diner</i>	763	46%	49%
<i>Morbihan Recreation Center</i>	1043	39%	58%
<i>City Hall</i>	463	35%	62%
<i>Morbihan Recreation Center</i>	644	30%	64%
<i>Grand Marais Vol Fire Dept</i>	617	30%	65%
<i>Catholic High School</i>	986	13%	83%
<i>Coteau Volunteer Fire Station</i>	618	2%	94%

In sum, we find it concerning that these closures will affect the Black community in Iberia in a disproportionate manner. The polling locations that have been closed would have served a total of 5,913 voters, all of whom must now be assigned to a different location. This could impact *all* Iberia voters, who will be inconvenienced by potentially overcrowded polling locations, particularly in the current context of the fourth COVID surge in Louisiana, which may persist well into the fall.

II. A Call for Answers and Action

The news of the closed polling locations comes with little clarity or information from the Council. In particular, it is unclear whether voters were notified of the potential change before the Council voted to close the eight polling locations. It is important that voters in Iberia Parish understand the following:

- Why was it necessary for the polling places to be closed for the November 13, 2021 election?
- When will voters know if any of the closed locations will be open for the 2022 elections or beyond?

² Registration numbers as of June 1, 2021, immediately before Iberia Parish made the polling place changes. LA. SEC’Y OF STATE, Registration Statistics – Parish, available at <https://www.sos.la.gov/ElectionsAndVoting/Pages/RegistrationStatisticsParish.aspx>.

- If Iberia Parish plans to make any of these closures permanent, will this Council open new locations to ensure equal access for all voters?

We respectfully request answers to these questions. We also request to know whether these closures *can* be reversed before the November 2021 election and beyond, and if so, whether the Council will commit to reversing them.

In the event that the closures cannot be reversed, we respectfully request that the Council make a concerted effort to notify voters of their new polling place assignments well ahead of the upcoming November 13, 2021 election. We understand that the Registrar of Voters either has or will soon send notices to affected registered voters.³ However, we are concerned that a single mailing will not be effective to reach as many voters as possible who were affected by these abrupt closures. We urge the Council to take the following steps to ensure effective notice to voters of the closures and new polling place assignments:

- Provide at least three notices to voters about their changed polling place and the changed election date to November 13, 2021;
- Engage media outlets to inform voters, including KATC, *The Daily Iberian*, *The Advocate*, and other local outlets to report on these polling location changes;
- Use geofenced social media ads to encourage voters to confirm their voting location through the Secretary of State's GeauxVote.com site or GeauxVote app;
- Ensure that the websites of the Parish Council, Clerk of Court, and Registrar of Voters each prominently display a list of the closed or consolidated polling places with clear instructions of where voters can confirm their correct voting location (e.g., GeauxVote.com), make available maps displaying the new locations, and provide confirmation that these changes in polling locations will be temporary;
- Ensure that there is clear signage at each polling location indicating where the precinct has been relocated or consolidated;
- Partner with community leaders to ensure that information regarding temporary polling place changes is broadly and effectively communicated;
- Engage community members in full consultation before the Council makes further polling place changes or selections for the 2022 and future elections;
- Explore opportunities to add an additional early voting site for the upcoming and future elections.

³ KATC News, *Number of voting locations in parish reduced, several closed* (Jul., KATC (July 26, 2020),2021), <https://www.katc.com/news/iberia-parish/number-of-voting-locations-in-parish-reduced-several-closed>.

Time is of the essence. Whatever this Council decides, it must do so urgently to reduce the number of voters that will be disenfranchised by the recent decision to close polling locations. We request that you respond to our questions by September 2, 2021.

If you have any questions, please contact Rev. Wilfred J. Johnson Sr. at ministerwjohnson@yahoo.com.

Best,

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