Vernon 'Refuses' State Election Drop Box, Builds 'Safer' Version

Vernon and state officials are at odds over a "local" election drop box versus a state-issued drop box.

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VERNON, CT — The town of Vernon and the state of Connecticut are again at odds over "safe" voting procedures and the bone of contention this time around is the drop box the state wants placed in each municipality for absentee ballots.
What appears to be a heated exchange of messages took shape about 72 hours after Independence Day, when Vernon Town Manager Michael Purcaro sent a message to Connecticut elections director Ted Bromley that the town is refusing delivery of a state-issued drop box designed for absentee ballot curbside drop-offs.

Purcaro, who is also the town's emergency management director and a former high-ranking state Department of Public Health official, said town instead wants to use a drop box connected to a window at the Vernon Town Clerk's office to for a "safe, secure, easily accessible and convenient" method of filing ballots.

In interviews Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, Purcaro stressed the town hall drop box was more secure and can be cleaned "after each exchange." He also said the town hall drop box concept is more secure than an "unmonitored" drop box placed at a curb.

The Vernon Department of Public Works designed and built the box and it was installed Wednesday morning. Purcaro said the box would be open for collection during regular town hall business hours and at "regular voting times" on Election Day.

It is designed to be "100 percent contactless" with a sensor that alerts the clerk staff to a submission.

The drop box issue is the second voting-related disagreement between state and municipal officials since restrictions were announced amid the coronavirus pandemic. During the budget season, Vernon officials staged two historic drive-up votes that inevitably approved both a debt service housekeeping issue and the town budget itself. Voters drove up to one station, showed identification through a closed vehicle window to mask-clad election staffers and then gave a thumbs-up or thumbs-down through a closed window at a second station.

The drop box concept evolved after Gov. Ned Lamont ruled the drive-up method unsafe for all towns.
In a response to Purcaro's refusal dated July 20, Connecticut Deputy Secretary of the State Scott Bates told Purcaro that the state could not "comply" with the refusal of the state drop box. He said the letter was serving as an "instruction" to not only accept the box, but to place the "secure" box at a convenient "outside" location.

"Our office has grave concerns about your unwillingness to protect the health and safety of your voters by providing them with a safe and trusted method of contactless delivery of their absentee ballots," Bates wrote. "No Connecticut voter should have to choose between protecting their health and exercising their right to vote, particularly when the means to protect that health has been provided to their town free of charge."

Bates then directed town officials to, "Please immediately take steps to rectify the situation."

The letter then included an eight-paragraph litany outlining most of the coronavirus-related safety mandates issued by the governor's office.

Purcaro called Bates' response "ignominious."
"The letter fails miserably," he said. "It lacks credibility. It doesn't even ask what we're doing."

He continued, "What we're doing is offering a safer and healthier way to collect ballots. I have a concern over an unmonitored drop box being touched by who knows how many people while unsupervised and not necessarily cleaned after each transaction. I also question the security of a drop box at the curb rather than one attached to town hall. A monitored ballot submission is consistent with the constitution. After each time it is used, it will be cleaned and wiped down for health reasons."

Purcaro added, "My letter clearly states we have a way of doing this in a safe and healthy manner. Mr. Bates' letter is dismissive and offensively intolerant. He cites health concerns that I had already outlined to the state."

Purcaro said the town planned to go forward with the drop box at town hall.