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NOLAN FINLEY | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Finley: Benson creates nightmare for motorists

Nolan Finley The Detroit News

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Voters who rallied to Jocelyn Benson's campaign pledge to reduce wait times at Secretary of State offices to 30 minutes or less should have read the fine print.

Getting out the door isn't the issue — it's getting in the door, and that can take months.

The Secretary of State operation under Benson has become a frustrating bureaucracy that's not meeting the needs of Michigan residents.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Benson has ended drop-in visits at branch offices, requiring those who need her services to make an appointment or conduct their business online.

Thankfully, many of the office's functions can be done by mail or over the Internet. But sometimes an in-person branch visit can't be avoided. Good luck with that.

Appointments are a precious commodity. Those who signed on to the Secretary of State website last week may have been shocked to learn the first available slots in many branches were three months away.

So, if your driver's license expires on your birthday in June, and you have to get a new photo taken, you risk driving most of the summer on an invalid license.

While roughly 50,000 next-day appointments are available statewide daily, finding one at a nearby branch office that matches your schedule requires considerable time searching the web and results in a lot of aggravation. It's a lot like the challenge of finding a COVID vaccine in the early days.

Visitors to the site are advised to come back at either 8 a.m. or noon, when new, next-day appointments are posted.

Submitted by Sen. R Johnson

As the site warns, next-day appointments fill up fast. When I clicked on the only appointment available at my branch, it had already been filled. And during the 8 a.m. Thursday window, the system crashed.

If you are planning ahead, you can reserve a spot up to six months in the future. Checking my local branch late last week, the first available appointment was Aug. 12.

If you do score an appointment, don't dare miss it. The site carries this warning:

"I understand if I fail to come for my scheduled appointment without prior notice, I may be blocked from making future appointments."

Banning a taxpayer from doing business with a tax-funded state agency? Never heard of that before.

Even with the appointment system in place lines at many branches still stretch out the door, and that 30-minute promise is an illusion.

Yet this is the system Benson said last week she wants to make permanent. No more drop-in visits, even after the pandemic ends.

Benson has had more than a year to adjust her operation to the challenges of COVID, and this is what she came up with?

Doing business with the Secretary of State has never been pleasant in Michigan. Now it's downright maddening.

For many citizens, the Secretary of State's office is their only face-to-face contact with state government. Getting your face into those offices shouldn't be such a dreadful experience.

Part of the mega windfall Michigan is getting in federal COVID-relief dollars should be invested in improving technology to allow all Secretary of State transactions to be done online.

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Sign up for the Nolan Out Loud morning report at detroitnews.com/newsletters.

Watch Finley on DPTV's "One Detroit" at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays.

People pushing back against appointment-only structure at Michigan Secretary of State branches

wxyz.com/news/people-pushing-back-against-appointment-only-structure-at-michigan-secretary-of-state-branches

By: Ali Hoxie

May 14, 2021



OAKLAND COUNTY, Mich. (WXYZ) — The days of walking into a Michigan Secretary of State branch are gone. However, the announcement branches will move to an appointment-only system is getting some push back, including from the former secretary of state.

“What we are telling the secretary of state in the budget is she must open the doors on the secretary of state office not just for an appointment,” Republican State Sen. Ruth Johnson of Michigan’s 14th District said.

Johnson served as Secretary of State for eight years before current Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson took was elected. She and other senators voted to approve a budget this week that would require branch offices to open for walk-ins.

During the pandemic, in-person walk-ins shut down and switched to online appointments only. A few weeks ago, Benson announced this change will remain permanent beyond the pandemic.

7 Action News Reporter Ali Hoxie put the system to the test. When booking an online appointment for a visit to a Secretary of State branch, the website states to visit at 8:00 a.m. and noon to schedule an appointment for the next day.

“Half of our appointments, and we continue to expand appointments and their availability, but half are reserved for those next-day slots,” Benson told 7 Action News.

We tried to book an appointment at 8 a.m. at the Livonia, West Bloomfield and Southfield branches. All three branches popped up a web page stating it could not be loaded due to high volume. Around five minutes later, all the next-day and same-day appointments were booked. All three branches have appointments booked out until August.

The response from the Secretary’s of States Office was to try again at noon or try again the next day. Others did have more luck getting an appointment.

“I’ve heard it’s hard to get appointments, so I just followed directions from other people that told me to get on at 8 o’clock first thing in the morning and look for appointments and it is really easy to get a next day or same-day appointment,” said Alex Easter, who recently went to the Southfield SOS branch.

The Secretary of State’s Office is working to increase appointments by 10%, with 35,000 appointments in the coming weeks. They state they are also trying to catch up on a backlog of appointments from the pandemic.

“I have been waiting for a couple months, I got kicked out one time had to reapply it canceled it on its own, it’s not a good look,” said Blak Jordan who also paid the Southfield SOS branch a visit.

“People can’t transfer a title or buy or sell a car, they are driving on expired licenses and they can’t get in to do their renewals, it can cause people to get a ticket and it can issues with your auto insurance if you’re in an accident,” said Senator Johnson.

Benson tells 7 Action News she would like the money to be used elsewhere, like expanding mobile office that would come to you or doing virtual appointments.

“We have been very clear with the legislature about the residence want which is more funding for branch office service that we can expand appoints and we can expand other ways for people to get their services done with the state,” Benson said

The ultimate goal is making sure people go to branch offices less often. That includes the

creation of kiosks at grocery stores to renew tabs and more online services.

Come July 1, a new law goes into effect changing how often you have to get your license picture renewed to 12 years hoping that too will free up appointments in the future.

If you do keep having issues booking an appointment online, or do not feel comfortable using online service, you can call 888-SOS-MICH (767-6424) to speak to a customer service representative.

Side hustlers sell Secretary of State appointments on Facebook Marketplace

5-14-21

2 fox2detroit.com/news/side-hustlers-sell-secretary-of-state-appointments-on-facebook-marketplace

By Jessica Dupnack

FOX 2 - The pain of waiting in line at Michigan's Secretary of State's Office is familiar to most drivers as they wait for new tags or a plate. But some enterprising residents are filling a need by holding spots for you.

Official says don't fall for those selling Secretary of State appointments online

Secretary of State spokesperson Tracy Wimmer said you shouldn't do this because you could lose your spot and the money.

Head to Facebook Marketplace and type in Secretary of State Appointments and you'll find dozens - if not hundreds - of offerings. Instead of searching for an appointment at the state's office, you pay the other user a fee of \$20 or \$25, and ta-da, you have your appointment.

But is it actually that easy? Secretary of State spokesperson Tracy Wimmer said you shouldn't do this because you could lose your spot AND the money.

"We are aware of it and you should not buy one because when we find out that happens we cancel the appointment," Wimmer said. "Please don't spend your money in that way."

In some cases, the same handful of people are hoarding appointments and hoping to cash in. Others are doing it a bit more legitimately, including one woman who told FOX 2 she charges to make an appointment and logs in every day at 8 a.m. and noon, when the SOS releases 15,000 appointments each day.

Wimmer said there's a better solution.

"If people need help then they should use our free service, dial 1-888-SOS-MICH mich and press 2, you will be able to speak to someone. We are adding call center capacity to make sure that people are connected in a timely matter to a human - and that's free of charge," she said.

You can still set an appointment online but Wimmer says they're adding 35,000 more appointments each month and increasing staffing at call centers.

Your appointment has been rescheduled. Remember to update your calendars with the new appointment date & time.

Click [here](#) and then select "Pre-Apply for a Michigan Driver's License or ID" to save time while you're at the branch.



To ensure the health and safety of you and our employees, please follow these

SOS Appointments SAME DAY APPTS

\$20

"It's usually taking two or three tries before people are getting a next day appointment," Wimmer said.

The days of grabbing a tab and waiting for hours are over. Now you just have to nab an appointment online.

"The data is showing once people get an appointment they are largely happy with the appointment system because they are in and out in 20 minutes from a branch office," Wimmer said.