

Summer 2015 Newsletter

(Save the Date. September 17th. Our Big Baseball Happy Hour.)

Hello Friends,

We are now well into the “interim” or the long break between sessions. Things slow down considerably in Annapolis, but that doesn’t mean we stop working! This is the time for 1) bill signing (or vetoing) by the Governor, 2) reflection on the legislative session, 3) following through on successful initiatives, and 4) looking forward to the work of the coming session.

Bills and Their Fate...

First off, I was pleased to have the Governor sign into law a bill I sponsored, HB452, to study testing in our state’s public schools. This bill has the Maryland Department of Education do a survey of all 24 public school systems to gauge testing hours and then calls for the formation of a commission to study the impact of that testing on instruction and make recommendations. I am pleased to have been appointed to the commission representing the General Assembly and by association the educators I have worked with for 35 years. The commission will have 19 concerned experts in all and I have begun setting up my priorities so that we can address the appropriate questions of our community once we begin studying the information collected. Among those priorities is not only to study the number of testing hours, but the collateral impact of testing logistics on the operation and quality instruction of other students in the school. I want any testing to be focused on improving our instruction, rather than ranking schools, limiting resources, evaluating teachers, and pitting communities against each other. We must verify how the results of those tests are being used to improve the quality of our children’s education.

The Governor also allowed an important funding formula for schools to pass into law without his signature. This formula, known as Geographic Cost of Education Index (GCEI), has been policy for a number of years under Thornton Commission recommendations. Unfortunately, the Governor cut that funding in half this year, costing urban and suburban school districts in Maryland \$68 million in vital funding. In response, the legislature passed a bill that makes this school funding law with a veto proof majority to protect Maryland’s stellar education system from cuts. Next year, this vital part of education funding will be mandatory and not subject to budgetary wrangling.

How the Session Went in General...

I’m proud to say that the general theme of the legislature this year was citizenship and community, with a strong concurrent interest in the environment. We had to play defense, but we kept you and our communities in mind during the fight.

We first took strong action in making sure the members of our community felt cared for by ensuring that state workers would keep the 2% raise they had been given and would not experience a cut. We helped to maintain Medicare and Medicaid payments for those in the state who genuinely need them, including expecting mothers. Both of these important measures were under threat during budget negotiations this session, but we fought hard for them.

Further, we attempted to reconnect people in the state with their communities, something we saw was sorely needed after the unrest in Baltimore this spring. A bill to grant voting rights to those who have been released from prison to probation was passed, but was unfortunately vetoed. I feel we will revisit this effort to make people who have served their time and want to

benefit their community have the rights to feel like they are a part of it. We made an effort to keep folks from getting a debilitating criminal record for possession of marijuana paraphernalia when the actual possession of a small amount is only a civil offense. We also added a bill to expunge records for those who were previously arrested for this offense. In this way, for those who have made mistakes and paid dearly for them, we afford a significantly greater chance to get a job and become productive members of our community.

We also focused on keeping Maryland's environment healthy. Personally, I am pleased to announce that I have been given a 100% approval rating from the League of Conservation Voters on my policies and voting record. Clearly, the environment is important to me and I take our responsibility to keep it clean, healthy, and accessible seriously. At the same time I would like to keep tax burdens on our citizens as low as possible. To that end, we in the legislature passed a bill leaving it up to individual counties to find a way to fund the storm water remediation required by the federal government. They are no longer compelled by the state to levy a "rain tax." They will, as do all jurisdictions in our surrounding states, have to continue to fix environmental problems associated with polluted runoff and our bill has an accountability structure for that. We in the legislature also continue to support the amelioration of other sources of pollution, including smokestacks and cars, and agriculture.

Initiatives That Need Further Work...

Soon, I will begin work on the testing commission and I intend to be a strong and committed voice there. It is interesting to note that PARCC testing in schools has already been dialed back from two major testing windows to one. This, I believe, is a response to this and other legislation around the county focusing on the impact of testing. When the report is complete next year, I will be actively watching MSDE's response to the suggestions and, if necessary, introducing legislation.

I am also pleased to be serving on a few interim committees:

First, I am participating in a work group on the cost of and help with the cost of post-secondary education in our state. Too many of our young adults graduate from college with significant, and sometimes debilitating, debt. With a job market still struggling from large economic issues, these young people are left trying to pay for mountains of debt will unemployed, underemployed, or at work that provides little room for movement. In the long run, this will inhibit savings, homeownership, and other major purchases that make our economy grow. This work group is searching for ways to reduce this debt and make college more affordable.

I am also serving on the joint committee on Children, Youth and Families. This group is focusing on how we can help disadvantaged youth reach their full potential as a benefit to themselves and our community. I am pleased to note that there are many support structures in our state that help with this priority and we are focusing on making them more efficient and maintaining adequate funding.

Potential Coming Legislation and Action...

One of the more disappointing actions of the interim so far was the Governor's decision to cancel the Red Line. We must look to a future when our current level of automobile use will be unreasonable and prohibitively expensive. Mass transit is not only becoming more popular for the young, but for households that find it reduces the bottom line on maintenance fees and car payments. Each initiative to create a public transit system is expensive, but it is a down payment

on our future and will be seen as a bargain in years to come. It will be up to us to reverse and/or revise this decision, making the Baltimore region a priority again and stimulating our economic future, both in immediate jobs and in economic development for years to come.

I am also currently formulating and making decisions on some legislation for the coming session. Among those of interest to me are requiring a deeper look at reading training for teachers, reducing or eliminating some fees on our college students, and, of course, reducing the negative impact of testing on instruction in our schools.

I have also been taking a look at our state song. If you have a minute, look them up. They are, to say the least, not really in keeping with the spirit of our state. A neighbor in district 12 brought this issue to me. It is through this kind of constituent activism that we can expose the work that's still before us. Do you have a burning issue? Let me know about it!

I will have more on potential legislation in the fall as the session comes into focus.

In the meantime, enjoy your summer. I know I am, whether taking time for myself or spending time at meetings and events around the district and state. See you in the fall!

Best,



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