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Appropriations Committee

Subcommittees
Capital Budget

Education and Economic Development
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The Maryland House of Delegates ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

2024 Legislative Session Report

Dear friends,

Being Towson's representative in the Maryland House of Delegates is the best job I've ever had. Every day is another opportunity to make an actual difference in people's lives. And during this year's 90-day legislative session in Annapolis, we made quite a bit of difference.

The votes we cast will significantly strengthen our roads, bridges and public transportation. Juveniles convicted of crimes will be held accountable, and given constructive paths forward. Librarians will be protected from efforts to ban books. New mothers and babies will be offered better postpartum care. Our state's vital hospital trauma system will have the resources it needs to save lives. Our waterways will be cleaner. And our public schools made more equitable.

It was a challenging year to make progress like this. Our state budget was smaller than usual, and in order to balance it, we had to focus on areas that we know are crucial to ensuring a robust future for Marylanders.

And just as we had that budget balanced, the Key Bridge collapsed, resulting in a devastating loss of life for the families involved, and a tremendous challenge for our region. I'm pleased to say that local, state and federal agencies came together quickly and are working to solve this multifaceted problem. We're making great progress in clearing shipping channels. We passed emergency legislation to ensure that those whose livelihood depends upon the Port of Baltimore will be taken care of. And plans are already underway to replace the bridge with federal dollars.

Investing in Towson High, Towson University, and more

As a member of both the House Appropriations Committee and the Capital Budget Subcommittee, I help ensure that important local building projects receive necessary funding. And this year, I've secured more than \$34 million for capital projects that are important to the constituents of our district, 43B. Even in tougher fiscal times, these investments matter, helping to strengthen our communities, while keeping our engineering and building tradespeople working and our economy moving.

Take Towson High School. The funding for this long-overdue rebuilding comes from the state capital budget. As a community we fought hard to make this project happen, and I'm pleased to say it's on track. We're currently in the design phase with an RFP going to contractors late in 2024, and construction expected to begin in the summer of 2025.

Here's a summary of the other capital funding coming to Towson:

Renovations and addition to Towson University's Smith Hall. I secured \$32.4 million to turn TU's former science building into a modern and dynamic space for the College of Fine Arts and Communications. It will serve mass communication, communications studies and electronic media and film students. It will also be the new home of the Faculty Academic Center of Excellence. This campus continues to thrive, and was recently named the No.1 public university in Maryland by *The Wall Street Journal*.

Improvements to Sheppard Pratt's Towson campus. This important mental health organization has operated continuously on this site since the late 1800s. I secured \$1.15 million to help bring critical infrastructure systems like water, sewer and electricity up to modern standards. This funding will also help the hospital's older residential crisis centers meet modern safety codes.

Renovations to the historic Towson Elks Lodge No. 469. This charitable organization has operated from its home near the Towson Circle since 1899. But its iconic building is in need of some improvements. I secured \$215,000 for a renovation and refresh that will allow this non-profit to continue doing its important work here in Towson. The group has an impressive record of service, focusing on the needs of veterans and youth. And its membership continues to grow and become more diverse every year.

Planning for an Outpatient Cardiovascular Center at UM St. Joseph Medical Center. The budget contains \$1.14 million to help open this important new heart center. The hospital has grown and changed so much in the years since its purchase by the University of Maryland. They're doing incredible things there, helping to keep all of us healthy.

My statewide legislation for 2024

I'm thrilled to say that eight of my bills passed both the House and Senate this year, and are set to become law. Here are the highlights.

HB 336 – Children with disabilities

Helps parents and guardians of children with disabilities save money tax-free, by having school systems better promote Maryland ABLE – a vital but underutilized program that helps families pay for qualified disability expenses.

HB 1486 – Cybersecurity workforce

Allows the Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO) to better administer its Cyber Maryland Program and Fund. This initiative creates a much-needed talent pipeline in cybersecurity and serves as a hub for state workforce development and research. I was also able to secure sustained annual funding for this important program.

HB 966 – Pension system fairness

Maintains the integrity of the Law Enforcement Officers Pension System, by closing a loophole that allowed sheriffs running unopposed for re-election to retire before the election, begin to collect their pension, then rejoin the force at full salary.

In addition to these three, five more pension-related bills passed, which refine and improve the state's retirement programs.

I'm also happy to announce that I was able to secure new funding to expand Maryland's financial literacy education for K-12 students, without needing to pass legislation. Good news for Maryland's public school students!

General Assembly funding priorities

Transportation is an issue important to all Marylanders. And we rely on our state Transportation Trust Fund to maintain our highways, local roads and bridges, the MTA and the WMATA in the Maryland suburbs, and the BWI-Thurgood Marshall Airport. But that fund, which is supported by taxes on gasoline and fees when titling or registering a car, is experiencing a shortfall right now due to a changing world. Cars are getting better gas mileage today, so the revenue we collect from fuel taxes is declining. Additionally, about 10% of the vehicles purchased each month in Maryland are zero-emission vehicles – hybrids or all-electric cars that don't purchase fuel at all. Yet our roads and transportation systems still need maintenance. So this year the General Assembly directed more of its existing budget to transportation issues like this, as well as increasing some fees for certain transportation-related services.

Education is another issue that's vital to our state. The landmark Blueprint for Maryland's Future that passed in 2021 is entering its third year of implementation, reaching more schools and more students in need every year. The General Assembly is committed to continuing this successful program by channeling existing funds to it, as well as additional revenue from an increase in the cigarette tax.

As a reminder of its importance: the Blueprint focuses on five areas that ensure all students who graduate from high school are career- or college-ready. It makes investments in early childhood education, expanding publicly funded pre-K to 3- and 4-year-olds. It provides robust career and technical training programs for students who choose not to attend college, and resources for students from low-income households who would benefit from tutoring and after-school enrichment. It invests in teachers, ensuring we have high-quality instruction in all of our schools. And the Blueprint's Accountability Implementation Board sees to it that the money invested is spent wisely and is truly creating positive outcomes.

Trauma centers throughout the state also received a good amount of attention and investment this year. While we're all familiar with the renowned work of our primary Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore, we also have a Level I trauma center at Johns Hopkins Hospital, and Level II trauma centers at Hopkins Bayview and Sinai Hospital of Baltimore. These centers, and others throughout Maryland, possess expertise and resources to care for difficult injuries, and must be prepared for the worst at all times. In order to help them do that, we are increasing an existing surcharge on auto registration, as the majority of patients come to trauma centers as the result of a car accident. It's money well-spent.

New state laws of interest

We passed new laws this year that will truly make a difference. These include:

HB 814 – Reforming juvenile justice

This bill refines earlier work done by the legislature to ensure that juveniles committing serious crimes are held accountable and that appropriate and effective diversionary programs exist to ensure best outcomes. The previous law that was passed exposed deficiencies in the system that were not in the best interest of the community or the juvenile offenders.

HB 1526 – Maryland Protecting Opportunities and Regional Trade (PORT) Act

Following the collapse of the Key Bridge and the near-total shutdown of the Port of Baltimore, this legislation provides financial assistance to affected workers and companies, as well as scholarships for the children and spouses of those who perished on the bridge. The bill authorizes the governor to use up to \$275 million from the rainy day fund to offset wages lost by employees of the Port, independent contractors, and Port-dependent businesses. If federal funds are allocated for these purposes, those funds will be returned to the state's Rainy Day Fund.

HB 785 – Freedom to Read Act

This act makes Maryland a national leader in the fight to counter the increasing attempts to ban books in public schools and libraries. It establishes a set of state standards that will protect Maryland's library collections and the librarians who curate them, and ensure diversity in reading material.

HB 1165 – Whole Watershed Act

To help restore the Chesapeake Bay, HB 1165 moves us away from random stream restoration projects, and incentivizes holistic restoration by streamlining funding and approval pathways for five innovative watershed projects. The bill also sets up guardrails for stream restoration projects, including: minimizing detrimental impacts such as tree or habitat loss, and ensuring co-benefits like climate change mitigation or carbon sequestration.

HB 1051 – Maryland Maternal Health Act of 2024

This bill ensures that hospitals across Maryland are taking steps to not only provide resources to new parents, but also reaching out during the postpartum period after discharge from the hospital. Postpartum depression is taking the lives of too many new moms, and this legislation aims to address that. It will also develop a report card for birthing facilities throughout the state, in order to protect both parents and children.

HB 933 – Behavioral Health Crisis Response Services – 988 Trust Fund

This legislation establishes a permanent funding source for 988, as Maryland has joined the national Suicide and Crisis Helpline. The use of this vital lifeline for mental health support has been overwhelming, particularly among young adults. This resource is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is literally saving lives.

HB 810 – Prohibiting the conversion of semi-automatic pistols

This bill prohibits the use of a Glock switch or any other auto-sear device in Maryland, which allows users to convert a semi-automatic pistol into a machine pistol capable of fully automatic fire. The high volume of these devices in circulation and the fact that they can be produced by a 3D printer in someone's home make it very difficult to control their use. Despite being prohibited federally, law enforcement and prosecutors in Maryland requested this bill as they believe it provides them with an additional tool to get Glock switches off our streets.

HB 585 – Protecting Election Officials Act of 2024

This bill prohibits someone from threatening an election official, or their family members, in connection with their work in elections. In this age of polarized politics, this bill was passed to ensure that those working to uphold our democracy benefit from common-sense protections, and to encourage more people to become election judges.

SB 1 – Electricity and gas consumer protection

This legislation protects energy customers, particularly the elderly and those in low-income neighborhoods who have been targeted by predatory third-party retail energy suppliers. These suppliers promise lower energy bills, but often leave customers stuck in contracts with much higher bills. The passage of this bill is estimated to save ratepayers \$150-\$200 million on electricity and \$50 million on natural gas.

HB 945 – Expanding teacher certification

This bill addresses a record shortage of teachers in the state. It creates additional pathways for those choosing to enter the teaching profession by helping people already working in support positions in schools to get the education and certifications they need to become teachers.

HB 990 – Reducing greenhouse gas emissions

This legislation brings both manufacturing and cement production under the state greenhouse gas emission standard. With this bill, Maryland joins other states to remove exemptions and ensure that these industries can be regulated in the joint effort to reduce carbon emissions.

HB 538 – Housing Expansion and Affordability Act of 2024

This legislation will help make housing in our state more affordable. Currently more than half of Maryland renters spend upwards of 30% of their income on housing, and the state has a shortage of more than 100,000 affordable units. While respecting local control of zoning, this bill prioritizes transit-oriented development within .75 miles of a passenger rail station, as building more housing near transit prevents sprawl development. This bill also prioritizes development that generates more housing while investing in blighted areas. And it gives incentives to charities including houses of worship that would like to use their land for affordable housing.

SB 539 – Reforming ticket sales

This bill provides consumers with protections related to ticket sales for concerts and events, including the banning of speculative ticket sales, where ticket sellers post tickets for sale that they don't actually possess.

HB 1143 – Addressing emergency room wait times

This bill establishes a commission to review emergency department wait times and develop strategies to improve them. Maryland's ER wait times are frequently cited as among the longest in the country.

SB 975 – Supporting Reproductive Health Care Clinics Act

This bill responds to the increasing threats of violence to abortion providers, and provides grants for abortion and reproductive health clinics to increase security measures with the addition of alarms, cameras, and perimeter lighting.

Other noteworthy issues

HB 1524 – Pimlico Race Course

In 2020 the state authorized capital bonds for the renovation of the Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore City. These bonds have never been used. A proposal was forwarded that would preserve the annual running of the Preakness and thoroughbred horse racing in Maryland, which has a direct \$2 billion positive impact on the state.

This new legislation will use the previously authorized state bonds to finance a renovation of the Pimlico Race Course and build a new training facility. The state will own Pimlico, at a purchase price of \$1, and a non-profit entity will be created and charged with the responsibility of running races at Pimlico with state oversight. It's a model used successfully in New York state, which owns three thoroughbred tracks, including Belmont Park.

State retiree prescription drug coverage

This is an understandable concern for our state government retirees. In 2007, the state began examining if it could continue to meet its future obligations to employees and retirees. After two workgroups a decision was made in 2011 to transition state retirees from a state-sponsored prescription drug plan to Medicare Part D prescription drug coverage.

Litigation was filed in 2018 against the state by a group of retirees. During this on-going litigation period no changes were made in coverage to retirees. The litigation ended with a final decision by the court that the state is allowed to make these benefit changes.

Retirees received letters at the beginning of 2024 explaining the change and the transition plan to a Medicare Part D plan that the retiree will choose. The Medicare part D plans will be available for review in the fall of 2024. A state benefits team will assist all retirees with this transition and is planning in-person, online, and telephone contacts to ensure the transition is smooth.

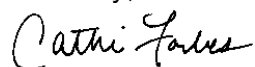
If this change affects you or a family member and it does not go smoothly this fall, please reach out to our office for assistance. We will do our best to advocate for you and let the benefits people at the state know where the transition is challenging or not working for retirees.

Here for you 365 days of the year

While our legislative session lasts 90 days, my Chief of Staff, Susan Parts, and I are here to help all year long. There's nothing we like more than helping constituents resolve problems, connect with local and state resources, and cut red tape. So please reach out if we can help.

Wishing you the best for the remainder of 2024! Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cathi Farver".