

November 17, 2011

Legislators Address The Business Community's Top Issues at The Howard County Chamber of Commerce's 2011 Legislative Breakfast

Key issues for Howard County businesses, including a possible gas tax, Plan Maryland, and job creation, were part of a lively question and answer session with legislators and Howard County Chamber of Commerce members Wednesday morning.

The Chamber's annual Legislative Breakfast provides an opportunity for business representatives to hear first-hand from their elected officials. At the event, the Chamber also released its White Paper: *Issues for Legislative Action 2012*, which provides background and outlines the Chamber's position on items that are critical to the business community.

"It is important for Chamber members to have an open dialogue with our elected officials about issues that affect businesses in our community," said the Chamber's Chairman of the Board, Ron Meliker. "And it is important for them to hear our member's perspective on how we continue to grow a healthy business climate in Howard County."

Moderator Richard Story invited U.S. Senator Ben Cardin to kick off the discussion. Senator Cardin said: "jobs are our number one priority," and noted that cyber-related industries are an area for job growth, particularly with the addition of the U.S. Cyber Command to Fort Meade. High tech and health care industries also offer opportunities for more jobs, he said, and "Howard County has been a leader in all these areas."

A discussion on a possible gas tax increase highlighted some disagreements. Participating lawmakers noted the need for substantial transportation improvements, including both public transit and roads. But Republican officials objected to any tax increase, and members of both parties expressed concern about placing a burden on low income individuals.

Delegate Guy Guzzone said he has received "mixed messages" from the business community on this issue, and is interested to hear more feedback.

Maryland Senator Allan Kittleman noted that the state's efforts to place restrictions on development under Plan Maryland are a regulatory issue and not up for a vote, but he said lawmakers were weighing in with their concerns about keeping local development issues under the control of local entities.

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Delegates Gail Bates (top) and Elizabeth Bobo answered questions at the 2011 Legislative Breakfast. (photos: Ken Rochon, www.TheUmbrellaSyndicate.com)

Elected officials also talked about strategies for job creation with Maryland Senator Edward Kasemeyer and Delegate Elizabeth Bobo speaking specifically about tax incentives, and Delegate Guzzone addressing the need to get technology ideas to the marketplace more efficiently.

County Council Member Courtney Watson earned applause for saying “the number one thing government can do for business is stay out of the way.” She pointed to the example of the new Green Valley Market in Elkridge, which was able to get permit and health code issues settled in a matter of weeks. Delegate Gail Bates called for that kind of streamlining to be available to all qualified businesses.

Senator Kittleman called for Maryland to have a “Right to Work” law that prohibits union membership from being a condition of employment, particularly to make the state more competitive with Virginia for attracting employers. County Council Member Greg Fox added his support to that idea and talked about eliminating the state and county living wage.



Moderator Richard Story leads the discussion.
(photo: Micki Bittner, www.BittnerPhotography.com)

County Council Chairman Calvin Ball responded by saying that promoting a high quality of life and supporting those who are underemployed are part of maintaining a strong workforce.

After touching on several other issues, the conversation drew to a close with each legislator who was still in attendance naming one priority for 2012. Senator Kittleman chose “keep spending within our means,” which earned a hearty “ditto” from Delegate Bates and Council Member Fox.

Senator Kasemeyer wants to see the deficit eliminated by the end of next year, and was joined in that sentiment by Delegate Guzzone. County Council Chairman Ball wants to see a “thoughtful, visionary general plan,” and Council Member Watson is looking for the Downtown Columbia plan to move forward “in a big way.” Council Member Mary Kay Sigaty attended the first part of the event, but was not able to stay for the full discussion.

Several legislators called upon the Chamber’s members to offer more comments and proactive suggestions through calls and e-mails, and to support their interests by testifying.

As the legislative session moves forward, the Chamber’s *Issues for Legislative Action 2012* will serve as a reference for elected officials and provide a consistent guide for the Chamber’s Legislative Affairs Committee. Sections of the document outline the Chamber’s stance on establishing predictable regulations, budget and taxation, energy and the environment, investing in education and workforce development, and health care, among other issues.

A copy of the White Paper will be available online at www.HowardChamber.com or by calling 410-730-4111.

