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County Executive Ulman Calls for Howard County to be a Leader in the “Innovation Economy”

State of the County Address Draws More than 400 Attendees to Chamber of Commerce Lunch

In his sixth State of the County Address, Howard County Executive Ken Ulman said because of factors such as excellent schools, a relatively low unemployment rate and a robust business community, “It would be easy to stand before you today and tell you that the state of our county is strong and getting stronger, as I have in the past.”

While that is still true, he said, “It is not enough. . . . We must seize this moment and remake our region as the model for the 21st century’s ‘innovation economy.’”

Tapping into the vibrant cyber and technology industries in the Howard County area to create jobs was a key theme of Executive Ulman’s speech, which he delivered to more than 400 guests at a lunch hosted by the Howard County Chamber of Commerce on Thursday. The event was held at Turf Valley in Ellicott City and sponsored by PNC Bank.

He also talked about the need to continue to support those things that add to the quality of life in the county – including public safety, a healthy environment and recreation activities – during difficult economic times.

Chamber of Commerce Board Chairman Ron Meliker said, “We are proud to host this event every year. It is always exciting to hear about not only our accomplishments, but the vision and ideas that lie ahead to help grow and nurture business in Howard County.”

The state of Maryland has been ranked first in research in the country, but 37th in its ability to turn innovations into commercial applications, Executive Ulman said. With the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, Fort Meade, universities, government agencies and private businesses providing new ideas, he said, “We must seize the opportunity to turn those ideas into jobs.”

He pointed to the Howard County Economic Development Authority’s Maryland Center for Entrepreneurship, and the Base Business Initiative working with BRAC and Cyber Command as examples of fostering innovation and creating local business opportunities.

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Top: Executive Ulman delivers his address (photo by Ken Rochon, The Umbrella Syndicate). Bottom: HCCC Board Chairman Ron Meliker, PNC’s Rich Ohnmacht, County Executive Ken Ulman and HCCC President Pam Klahr.

Those opportunities do not mean only high-tech jobs, but jobs in construction, retail, real estate, manufacturing and professional services, he said. “Every business stands to gain from opportunity presented by the innovation economy. When the economy is humming, it is humming for everyone.”

Ulman also pointed to the Broadband Across Maryland project, in which Howard County led a coalition of 10 jurisdictions to use federal funds to build a statewide broadband network, as an example of innovation and collaboration. He said that project is creating construction jobs now, providing broadband capacity that helps schools, health care providers and public safety agencies, and is saving taxpayer dollars by increasing government efficiency.

During his speech, Executive Ulman said Howard County has received numerous accolades and top rankings for quality of life measures. Now he is pleased, he said, that Match.com chose Columbia as the number eight place in the country to date a nerd.

Amid laughter from the audience, Executive Ulman noted that it is serious praise when you consider that the dating website searched for locations with the most tech-savvy and highly educated citizens.



Executive Ulman addresses a crowd of more than 400 at Turf Valley during his State of the County Address (photo by Ken Rochon, The Umbrella Syndicate).

While there is much to praise about the county, Executive Ulman also noted it is challenging to continue to provide high quality services in tight economic times.

Since he took office, he said, funding from the state government to help provide core services has dropped from \$30 million to a little over \$4 million, and a proposal to send a “\$17 million dollar bill” to the county for teacher pensions means “our progress will be in serious jeopardy.”

Mr. Meliker said the speech highlights the fact that the business community needs to be vigilant about the effect state policies will have on the local environment. He said he plans to see the Chamber and its members work with the County government to manage economic adversity together.

Public education will continue to be a top priority for the county, as will public safety, Executive Ulman said. Beyond those areas, Executive Ulman said he is committed to projects that improve the quality of life in the county. Among the items he mentioned as recent successes were the first solar-powered school in Maryland, a pilot food scraps recycling program, the opening of phase one of Blandair Park, the new Tourism Welcome Center and the renovated Miller Branch Library.

In economic development efforts: “Howard County has all the right ingredients, they just need to be enhanced for a changing landscape,” Executive Ulman said as he concluded his remarks.

“Here is the challenge before us: to do the things that keep Howard County great, even as the world changes. ... There is something about Howard County that is special: our optimism, our hard work, our acceptance of our neighbors and our belief in a better tomorrow.”

