

Welcome Back to the 2010 Legislative Session

It is so hard to believe another year has passed and that the 2010 General Assembly Session will begin on January 13, 2010 and close 90 days later at midnight on April 12, 2010. I expect the session to be very busy, focusing on many diverse topics including the budget, education, and energy.

BUDGET

Maryland's financial situation is once again, expected to be the main focus of the legislature. The Governor and the legislature have already cut \$4.6B and eliminated 3,310 positions since FY06. Spending for FY10 (July 2009 through June 2010) is below each of the last three years, including Governor Ehrlich's last budget. General fund spending for FY10 is \$2.3B below FY06 spending levels.

Maryland continues to have \$620M in the Rainy Day Fund and our budget is balanced. In October 2009, Standard & Poors, in their most recent affirmation of a AAA bond rating for the State of Maryland, views Maryland as having a long history of prudent fiscal management, including making difficult decisions to restore structural budget balance and a diverse, broad-based economy, which has historically outperformed the national economy. Maryland is one of only seven states in the country to retain the coveted triple-A bond rating, even through this global recession.

The Speaker and Senate President have emphatically said that we will not increase the burden on working families by raising taxes this year. This year, the budget process will begin in the Senate Chamber, last year it began in the House of Delegates.

EDUCATION

The State has frozen tuition at Maryland's public universities for four years in a row, bringing Maryland from 6th most expensive in the country down to 17th. The General Assembly first instituted the tuition freeze in 2006, after rates increased 40% under the prior Administration. The tuition freeze is likely to be a subject of debate this year, particularly when states across the country are increasing tuition's at double-digit rates when many families are already struggling. Over the past three years, enrollment in Maryland's public universities has grown 15.8% and community college enrollment has grown to 128,093 students (an increase of 5% from the previous year). Maryland is now below the national average for college tuition, according to the College Board.

Gang Legislation

Gangs in our neighborhoods and schools, has been on our minds and in the news for much of the year. Speaker Busch has launched a series of meetings to craft legislation that would allow school systems and law enforcement to share information regarding criminal gang activity in schools. Currently, there is recorded gang activity in every county in the state of Maryland and studies show that the average recruitment age is between 12 and 14 years old. It is expected that legislation will eliminate communication barriers between agencies and focus on enabling our schools to be a safe haven for our children.

Ignition Interlock

According to the Department of Transportation, one third of all fatalities over the past five years involved alcohol. Last year, the *Task Force to Combat Driving Under the Influence of Drugs and Alcohol* recommended the imposition of a mandatory one year license suspension for a person convicted of drunk driving more than once in five years, tightening the underage drinking laws and addressing the problem of repeat offenders.

Following the death of a Johns Hopkins University student this fall, allegedly at the hands of a repeat drunk driving offender, legislation is expected to be introduced for increased use of ignition interlock in Maryland. Currently, the MVA has an Ignition Interlock System program in place that establishes strong incentives for drivers to choose ignition interlock over other penalties like license suspension or revocation. A court may also order participation in the program as a condition of sentencing. Ten states in the country have a mandatory program for first time offenders with a blood alcohol content of .08 or greater – eight states at .15 or greater.

Electricity

The issue of electricity re-regulation has been the subject of significant debate in the legislature throughout my term. Although the YreregulationΦ bill, ultimately failed in the House Economic Matters Committee, it did cause the committee to wrestle once again with issues of electricity pricing, particularly for the residential customers. During the interim, the House has been studying the electricity markets and industry structure, we continue to be concerned with the lack of competition in the retail, residential and small commercial customer classes, competition has already developed in the large commercial and industrial customer classes. The issues of longer-term generation, transmission, and conservation measures to maintain a reliable and affordable electricity supply will be debated during the coming session. The House Economic Matters Committee has been focused on increasing consumer choice opportunities, which could benefit energy purchasers in the short term, as opposed to energy re-

regulation that some experts predict would have a \$15B – \$20B price tag and take over 10 years to implement.

Please keep in touch with me and let me know how you feel about the issues. Your thoughts and ideas are always important to me, as always, please feel free to contact me at Pamela.beidle@house.state.md.us or at 410-841-3370 if I can be of any assistance. During the session, I get thousands of letters and emails, be sure to include your name and address when you write to me. My staff and I read each and every piece of correspondence and will get back to you as soon as possible. Please welcome Laura Vykol to my staff, as my intern for this session. Laura is a junior at University of Maryland. Also, Nancy Lipin Crawford is beginning her fourth year as my Legislative Assistant.

For more frequent updates about my activities in Legislative Session 2010, please visit my Facebook page, *Pam Beidle*.

Best regards,

Pamela G. Beidle
State Delegate