



Kittleman transition team offers its recommendations

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Kittleman's transition team offers its recommendations
Just what has HoCo Exec. Kittleman's transition team told him he needs to do?

Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman has a lot to consider when it comes to improving county government over the next four years.

That's one take away from the extensive list of suggestions presented to the new county executive in a 25-page report submitted last week by his transition team, a 133-member group of citizens appointed to examine all areas of the county's administration.

The report identified a host of potential next steps for Kittleman as he shapes his administrative style and priorities.

Broken down into individual recommendations from the group's nine committees, each of which dealt with a different domain of county government, the report was framed by a set of overarching observations, highlighted by transition team chair Michael Davis, a senior partner at the Columbia-based law firm Davis Agnor Rapaport and Skalny.

Chief among them: open and transparent government, a theme of last fall's county executive campaign.

The county's website, which the team called "problematic," is in need of a makeover so that residents can find information more easily, according to the report.

"When I'm talking to experienced employees and they have a hard time finding things, how do you think the citizens are going to find anything?" Davis said.

The report also cited a need for the county to expand the information that's available to residents.

Kittleman has said he plans on implementing a government accountability program called HoCo Stat to bring more data to residents.

Last week, he reiterated his intention to start that program in the coming months. Transition team members recommended the Office of Budget lead the data collection process for HoCo Stat, a suggestion Kittleman said he would follow.

As for the website, he said, "it's not going to be a short-term fix, but it's one that's got to be started now."

Another area for improvement, according to the transition team's report, is property acquisition. The county made news with its recent purchase of Columbia's struggling Long Reach Village Center, and in the last few

years has approved other acquisitions such as the old Columbia Flier building, the Ascend One building and Belmont Manor.

The issue, said Davis, is that the initial purchase price of the property has not ended up being the total cost. The report cites the Flier building, which was bought last year for \$2.8 million but is now expected to cost nearly \$7.4 million more to renovate.

"It's interesting to buy up this stuff but they don't have a clear picture with what they're going to do with it," Davis said. The transition team recommended requiring a fiscal analysis for future acquisitions.

Kittleman has criticized the county's purchase of commercial properties, most recently in his state of the county speech.

"Had we known [the full fiscal impact] before, maybe we wouldn't have made that decision" to purchase the Flier building, Kittleman said last week.

He said he hasn't decided yet whether to sell off some of the county's recently acquired property, though he said "everything's on the table.

"We would work with the council on that if we made that decision," he added.

Another Kittleman campaign priority touched on by the report is the possible creation of a Department of Aging. The report says "a strong minority" of committee members instead recommended the county executive consider creating a Department of Health and Human Services similar to the one in Montgomery County, which would unite the Health Department, Housing Department, Mental Health Authority, Office of Children's Services, Office of Aging and Office of Disability Services under one umbrella.

Other recommendations made by the transition team include creating an annual public health symposium; pursuing a "major capital investment" in a regional transportation system from the state and federal government, as well as private investors; creating a county government intern program to recruit new employees as its experienced workforce ages; and re-evaluating Healthy Howard, the community health program created in 2006 to provide health services to uninsured county residents.

Some of the recommendations, such as increasing salaries for community college educators, would require significant financial investments. Kittleman has already warned that Howard County faces a lean budget next fiscal year.

Davis said some recommendations would have to be carried out over time.

"With many of these issues, significant community support will be required to create a solution; for others, it will just require a focus by leaders in Howard County Government to implement a solution," Davis wrote to Kittleman. "Regardless, by identifying them in this report, it is hoped that conversations will begin that will result in answers that can be presented for solution."

Despite identifying areas in need of improvement, the report – unlike some previous transition team reports – stopped short of being directly critical of a particular department or its leadership.

Davis said this was because the employees the team interviewed came across as "a really good group of people working for the county" who gave the "sense that things were moving forward in a very positive manner."

County Council vice chairman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat who owns a government consulting firm, said he wasn't surprised by any of the committee's recommendations, including increasing the percentage of county contracts that go to county businesses.

"I think that's a good start and it's something that can be done immediately — it takes administrative action," he said.

Councilman Calvin Ball, a Democrat from east Columbia, said he thought the report contained "some intriguing ideas.

"I look forward to increased investment, particularly when it comes to issues of mental and physical health; combating obesity; working to increase the salaries of our educators; working with police and fire to ensure that we continue to meet the safety challenges of today and tomorrow, including cybercrime; increasing community policing; and shortening response time so we can be a more effective and efficient county as it relates to our neighbors," he said.

Kittleman said he didn't see any "complete overhauls" called for in the report.

"There are things that need to be addressed, but there's a lot that's working," he said.

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