

School board prefers no election changes

Board also votes to oppose bill adding restrictions to handling of public information requests

BY LISA PHILIP
lphilip@baltsun.com

The Howard County school board voted to oppose a bill that would change the way its members are elected, as well as a bill that would make it more difficult for the school system to turn down public information requests.

Board member Cynthia Vaillancourt suggested voting on official board positions after a public hearing after the Howard County state delegation holds a public hearing Dec. 1 to gather citizen input about the bills and other proposed local legislation.

"We can hear what the public has to say," she said, "and at least pretend we have interest in what people in the county think."

At Thursday's board meeting, school board member Bess Altwerger said that taking a position then would be "premature" since the board received the text of the legislation in the past week.

"I don't appreciate being rushed into taking a vote on this tonight," she said, adding that she would also like to attend the Dec. 1 public hearing before taking a stance.

After hearing these concerns, the board proceeded to discuss and vote on the legislation.

The first legislation the board discussed, which was drafted by County Councilman **Jon Weinstein** and state Del. Vanessa Atterbeary, would require that five of the seven board members be elected by councilmanic district and the two remaining members be elected by voters across the county. All seven board members are currently elected by countywide voting.

The legislation was developed in response to some parents' concerns that the board is currently not responsive to voters and that parents do not know which board member to turn to for help with school-related matters.

Board members Christine O'Connor and Ellen Flynn Giles criticized the bill based on their belief that each member should represent and work for all of the students in the county, not only the students in one council district.

"Our constituents are every single resident, every single student in Howard

County. We come to understand, to appreciate, to support every district in the county," said Giles. "I would regret not being responsible to every single person in Howard County."

"It promotes a community feel to have everybody know about every school in county," O'Connor said. "This doesn't promote collaboration in my mind."

French pointed out that board members are already assigned to different parts of the county or sets of schools called "clusters."

"It's our way of familiarizing ourselves with that part of county and those schools' needs," she said. Board members rotate to different clusters each year.

"I'm not sure why this would be so different from how the County Council operates," Vaillancourt said about having board members elected by district. "I haven't heard complaints that the County Council only focuses on his or her own district."

The second bill discussed, which was proposed by state Del. Warren Miller, would impose restrictions on how the school system handles public information requests. This includes requiring the school system to convince a judge that there is a valid reason for not releasing an interagency memorandum, which are on occasion protected from public release.

The bill, written in response to constituent complaints about school officials' handling of public records requests, would also require that the system gets the approval of the state's attorney general to withhold documents under exceptions to the Public Information Act.

French was the only board member to comment on Miller's bill, saying that it unjustly targeted the school system.

"They were singling us out," she said. "They wanted to target us with responsibilities that no one else in the state has."

The board voted 6 to 1, Vaillancourt dissenting and Altwerger absent, to oppose both of the above bills.

The board unanimously voted to oppose a third bill that would lower the maximum county income tax rate from 3.2 to 2.7 percent, citing the need for adequate revenue to fund quality education for the county's students.