

Council lobbies community groups for advocacy

Mold, snow, taxes and living wage on the agenda

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Carving out space for community services in this fiscal year was a major talking point at the Howard County Council's annual discussion, organized by the Association of Community Services of Howard County.

Addressing representatives from non-profit organizations, community organization and residents on Tuesday, council members laid out their legislative priorities and urged the audience to aggressively advocate for community services and human service delivery.

"In reality we need village boards, nonprofit organizations and residents to speak about their needs so that we can then utilize our ability to hopefully impact inclusion of funding," said Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty. "The more times you say it the harder it is to ignore."

County Council Chairman Calvin Ball

announced two new pieces of legislation he plans to pre-file on Thursday. The first would allow the Howard County Environmental Sustainability Board to review mold-related reports and make recommendations to the council and the county executive. The second would allow residents more time to shovel sidewalks in the event of a state of emergency is declared.

The discussion revealed concerns about current legislation, including the proposed phase-out of the stormwater remediation fee, the county's new website and County Executive Allan Kittleman's bid to reorganize the Department of Citizen Services and the county's affordable housing entities.

Sigaty said she was frustrated the council had to revisit the stormwater fee.

"I wish we didn't have to work on this," Sigaty said, as council members nodded in unison. "We already worked on it."

The council will also revisit legislation passed after months of debate in 2013 that would change the structure of the county's growth tiers, a state-mandated system that protects the Chesapeake Bay from the harmful effects of septic systems.

Council Vice Chairman Jon Weinstein said he will continue to prioritize the revitalization of historic Elkridge, citing numerous rundown homes and a lack of good infrastructure.

Councilwoman Jen Terrasa said she will push for efforts to address mental health issues and institute a living wage.

"The operating budget will give us a preview of what kind of battles we're going to have," Terrasa said.

Addressing questions about the county's aging infrastructure, Terrasa said the county has a clear choice: "Pay now or pay more later."

Problems with the county's water mains became increasingly evident when two water main breaks occurred during this year's blizzard, Weinstein said.

Water pressure in the southern part of the county dipped. When a water purification plant stopped working, the county had to reroute water from a different source, Sigaty said.

Turning to Kittleman's proposed reorganization, council members said they need more information to better understand implications of Kittleman's proposal

to sever the Housing Commission from the Department of Housing and Community Development.

While Sigaty said she supported turning the "housing commission loose to do the work it is supposed to do," she questioned giving the housing department the responsibility to oversee community-service partnerships.

"Having grants does not mean that you have the expertise to look across all of them," she said.

The question, Sigaty said, is how the two entities would hold hands once they split off.

Ball reiterated the need for a "more collaborative community" process to understand the implications of the reorganization.

Jackie Eng, an Association of Community Services member, challenged the audience to stage a strong showing at a public budget hearing March 14.

"Nagging is a good thing," Eng said. "You have all the stories that can make a difference."

Councilman Greg Fox was not in attendance.