

Campaign fund, bike initiatives clear council

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With a flourish of vacillating motions and hints of acrimonious debate, the Howard County Council passed two measures Monday night that could guide the county's future campaign funding systems and its network of pathways.

A proposal to change the county's charter to create a publicly funded campaign system, which runs like a small-donor matching program, will head to the ballot in November. If approved by voters, details of the program, which costs between \$2 million to \$2.5 million over four years based on early estimates, will be hammered out in the coming months and take effect for the 2022 election cycle. Casting the lone dissenting vote, Councilman Greg Fox previewed future debates about the system, which co-sponsoring council members Jen Terrasa and Jon Weinstein said aligns with national momentum to empower citizens to become part of the public process.

Questioning why the charter change did not include details about funding sources or protocol, Fox said the proposal doles out "government handouts" through a system where taxpayer dollars fund opponents at a time when Democrats in the county are facing a dip in funding.

"I don't see this as a handout. I see this as a commitment to fair elections," said Terrasa.

"We're setting up the process," Weinstein said. "Any system of this nature requires that people can count on it."

In a unanimous vote, the council passed Bike Howard, a long-awaited plan to promote bicycling as a safe and environ-

mentally friendly mode of transport and create a network of countywide pathways connecting commercial and residential areas.

The plan includes a series of amendments — such as the creation of a pedestrian advisory board and language clarifying how the plan can be updated — that underscore the lengthy document's purpose as a planning tool. Plans to remove a connecting pathway near the Allview community in response to concerns about flooding were shot down by the council in order to accommodate the plan's intended purpose as a guiding tool, with Terrasa casting the lone dissenting vote.

"It is a plan and plans evolve," Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty said.

Zoning 'error' repair

In a flashback to the county's overhaul of zoning regulations in 2013, the council approved a substantial reduction in the amount of commercial space required per residential units for developments in the Corridor Activity Center district.

Developer Atapco Howard Square I Business Trust sought the change, which slashes the number of commercial square feet required per residential unit from 300 to 70, in order to correct a zoning "error" that the developer said was too high to be "commercially viable." The Zoning Department called the original requirement "excessive" in a June 2015 staff report.

"Imposing a set minimum commercial space requirement with the intent to create significant levels of commercial floor area in such a development often does not lead to the achievement of this

goal," according to the report.

Under certain requirements, developments with more than 800 residential units can now opt-out of the commercial space requirement in lieu of paying a fee of \$50 fee per square foot of the reduced commercial space. If paid under certain conditions, the fee allows the developer to settle for 20 square feet of commercial space per residential unit.

An amendment introduced by Council Chairman Calvin Ball reduced the requirement from 25 to 20 square feet and allows fee reductions where viable commercial space is especially problematic.

Casting the only dissenting vote, Fox said the change is "a cheap way" for developers to skirt requirements with a fee reduced "to almost nothing."

Ball said the measure was necessary to complete an existing development along the corridor.

"At the end of the day we have an incomplete neighborhood," he said.

Other measures

Ball's mold oversight legislation breezed through the council unanimously.

The Environmental Sustainability Board will review existing mold reports commissioned by the Howard County School System and submit evaluations and recommendations to the council and the county executive by Sept. 30. A temporary work group will address the board members' initial concerns about the board's qualifications to complete the study.

The administration's proposal to conduct independent air quality assessments

is pending as the administration works with the Board of Education to finalize a memorandum of understanding.

After passing unanimously, Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman's proposal to reorganize offices became more of a shuffle and less a reorganization. A new director will be hired to lead the housing commission, which will remain separate from the housing department. Members serving on the commission will need to meet knowledge-based requirements.

Beginning "the first of several steps," Weinstein's measure to curb infill development in two residential zones passed unanimously.

On the drawing table for several months, the bill draws up requirements for unit types and other development design considerations to ensure compatibility and interconnectivity in certain residential areas while preserving privacy.

The council passed, then tabled, a bill to bring 91 acres owned by Maple Lawn into a district that has access to public water and sewage. The call-back was required because the bill was linked to the master water and sewage plan, which Fox requested to table to answer lingering questions.

The council also unanimously passed measures to extend the deadline to remove snow from sidewalks during a state of emergency and amend a retirement plan for police and fire employees to properly credit staff who served in the military. The county's fire prevention code will also be updated to stay on par with safety and protection requirements.