

April 11, 2008

Dear Neighbor:

Greetings from Annapolis! The Maryland General Assembly has just completed its 2008 regular session and I wanted to share with you news of my legislative accomplishments as well as information about other bills that might be of interest to you.

First, I want to share a few thoughts about our state's economy. Maryland has been hit very hard by the mortgage crisis and these are tough financial times; as a result, the General Assembly was forced to make budget cuts totaling \$1.5 billion. Electric utility rates are unacceptably high, though we did pass a one-time, \$170 rebate for 1.1 million BGE customers. I believe we must commit more seriously to conservation and development of alternative energy sources and in the long run craft a new regulatory structure for electric utilities to get rates under control.

#### **Prince George's County Legislation**

- **HB 1039, Prince George's County Hospital Authority:** This emergency bill pumps \$48 million over the next two years into the struggling hospital system, which includes Laurel Regional Hospital. In the meantime, a new, seven-member board will work to find a hospital company that would take over ownership from the county and management from Dimensions. There is still much work to be done to get the system on track, and both the state and county must finalize within 90 days future funding commitments or the deal will collapse. I voted for this legislation when it came before the Health and Government Operations Committee and again on the House floor. It is an important first step and one I hope ensures the long-term viability of the hospital system.
- **HB 1041, Prince George's County Board of Education:** In 2010, the current makeup of the Board of Education with five district-based seats and four at-large seats will revert to nine single-member districts, which are established in the bill. Board members will be elected by the registered voters of each individual school board district and serve four-year terms, except that in the first general election cycle only, the five members with the lowest vote total serve two-year terms. This is to establish the pattern of staggered terms so the entire board is never up for election at the same time. I sponsored an amendment to the bill so the City of College Park is in a single school board district – District 2 – rather than divided between two districts as the lines had been drawn. Most of the rest of State Legislative District 21 will remain in school board District 1.

I was a lead sponsor or co-sponsor on three bills that should be signed into law and will directly affect the quality of life in Prince George's.

- **HB 1010, Prohibition on Roadside Solicitation of Money:** During my 2006 campaign, voters complained that roadside solicitors were a distraction and a danger to themselves and motorists. In 2007, I lead the effort to ban roadside panhandling in Anne Arundel County; this year, I spearheaded a similar effort in Prince George's.

- **HB 1030, Lifting the Salary Caps for Prince George’s Prosecutors:** I worked closely with cosponsor Delegate Dereck Davis of District 25 to raise the maximum pay beginning in 2011 for the county’s elected State’s Attorney from \$125,500 to \$150,000. The bill also allows the County Executive and County Council beginning Oct. 1, 2008, to increase the number of positions and pay for the two deputy state’s attorneys and 80 assistant state’s attorneys. Prince George’s needs more tools to combat crime; I believe funding decisions for such efforts should be made in Upper Marlboro, not Annapolis.
- **SB 9 (HB 339), Beer Keg Registration Forms:** Senator Jim Rosapepe and I worked with the City of College Park on this legislation, which will require Prince George’s retailers to fill out most of the registration form that is affixed to the keg and to record, along with the buyer’s name, date of birth, and address, an identifying number from the driver’s license or other ID used for the purchase.

#### **Anne Arundel County Legislation**

- **HB 704, Higher Education Investment Fund Spending:** With Maryland expecting to gain thousands of new jobs from the expansion of Ft. Meade, demand for continuing education and workforce development initiatives will grow as well. HB 704 authorizes the Maryland Higher Education Commission Fund to make grants to community colleges, universities and Regional Higher Education Centers that create programs to meet those needs. The FY 2009 budget bill includes \$3 million for BRAC-related higher education programs.
- **HB 515, Exempting Not-for-Profits from Development Impact Fees:** Not-for-Profit organizations that have been in business for at least three years and are seeking to build in Anne Arundel will be exempt from the county’s development impact fees.

#### **Health Related Legislation**

Because I am a member of the House Health and Government Operations Committee, many of the bills I sponsor are related to health care access, affordability and service delivery. I am proud to report that four of my health care bills are expected to be signed into law.

- **HB 991, HIV Testing, Informed Consent and Treatment:** Under this bill, adults, adolescents and pregnant women who seek treatment of any kind in a hospital setting will be offered an HIV test on site and will be screened unless they specifically refuse. Early diagnosis and intervention is important for all persons but particularly pregnant women who risk transmission to the baby. Those who test positive will receive immediate referrals for treatment and supportive services. This new approach to screening, referred to as an “opt-in” rather than “opt-out” policy, meets the Center for Disease Control’s recommendation for routine, universal screening.
- **HB 578, Coverage of Amino-Acid Based Elemental Formula:** This law will require insurers to pay for a special formula for infants and young children with severe allergies and other conditions that make them unable to digest milk-based formula. Many of these children cannot eat solid foods, so this formula is their only source of nutrition. Yet, coverage of this medically-necessary formula had been voluntary for Maryland insurers. Now they will pay the cost, which averages about \$5,000 per child per year.
- **HB 1176, Establishment of a Committee on Childhood Obesity:** Nationwide, about nine million children ages six to 19 are overweight or obese, a figure that has tripled since 1980. After consulting with many experts, it became clear to me that Maryland cannot address this health crisis without a better sense of the scope of this epidemic and its causes. HB 1176 would help the state determine how pervasive the problem is and would identify contributing factors – from physical education mandates in schools to food variety in restaurants and school cafeterias.

- **HB 585, Nursing Homes, Safe Patient Lifting:** Last year, I sponsored legislation mandating that all Maryland hospitals establish a committee dealing with safe patient lifting. The goal is to reduce strains, sprains and other employee injuries resulting from patient lifting. HB 585 establishes the same requirements in nursing homes where the injury rate associated with patient lifting is significantly higher. It was signed by Governor O'Malley on April 8.
- **HB 1492, Senior Prescription Drug Assistance/Medicare Part D Subsidy:** I cosponsored this bill, which requires CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield to provide \$4 million annually in prescription drug assistance for 30,000 seniors on Medicare Part D.

### Other Legislation

I sponsored other bills that should be signed in the coming weeks, including:

- **HB 610/SB 506, Preserving Heritage Language Skills:** This bill creates a task force to identify ways to preserve the fluency skills of the 14.5 percent of Maryland families who speak a foreign language at home while also encouraging immigrants to learn English. The bill seeks to preserve skills in languages such as Persian, Arabic, Korean and Russian for social and cultural reasons and in the interests of national security, defense and international trade.
- **HB 340/SB 31, Expanding University of Maryland Shuttle Bus Service:** This bill, which I sponsored with my District 21 colleagues, Senator Rosapepe and Delegates Barbara Frush and Ben Barnes, opens the University of Maryland shuttle bus system to city of College Park residents. Allowing city residents to ride the bus will help alleviate traffic congestion along the U.S. Route 1 corridor.

### Bond Bills

These District 21-sponsored bills provide state financing for three capital projects.

- **HB 579/SB 462, Historic Laurel Mill Ruins:** The City of Laurel will receive \$175,000 to stabilize the Laurel Mill Dam and create interpretive signs at Riverfront Park.
- **HB 922/SB 805, Laurel Armory Anderson-Murphy Community Center:** The City of Laurel will receive \$75,000 to continue upgrading the 80-year-old National Guard building, which houses year-round recreational programs.
- **HB 352/SB 296, Laurel Boys & Girls Club:** The Boys & Girls Club will receive \$100,000 for renovations to the 109-year-old building it occupies on Montgomery Street.

Not all of my bills passed, but I am pleased with those that did, and I plan to reintroduce in the 2009 session some of those that did not. Thank you for contacting me during the 2008 session to share your ideas, express your concerns and provide feedback. Many of your suggestions actually become the stuff of legislation and they help improve the quality of all our lives.

I am honored to represent and serve you, and I welcome your telephone calls and emails. My office will be staffed three days a week during the interim session, so please don't hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Joseline Peña-Melnyk