

Council President Billy Boniface

2008 Legislative Address

February 5, 2008

I'm happy to report that the freshman Council of 2007 has somehow managed to survive its first year in office. We have put our first budget behind us, gone through the county's largest bond sale to date, supported the Executive on several initiatives while coming up with a few of our own, but most importantly we learned how to work together to accomplish all this in a short amount of time.

Each district representative has been successful on many fronts.

Councilman Guthrie has made dealing with the crime element in his district priority one. Edgewood's problems are Harford County's problems. By working with the County Executive and federal representatives he has been able to secure several different funding sources to reinforce the County's efforts to protect the citizens of Edgewood during these troubled times. Councilman Guthrie has also with the assistance of Sheriff Bane, brought on board a new and promising program run by the nationally known group the Guardian Angels. While his tactics are what we on the Council call colorful at times, Mr. Guthrie keeps his district on everyone's radar screen.

Public safety throughout the county as a whole has been strongly supported by the Executive and the Council. We approved significant salary increases during the last budget that have allowed Sheriff Bane to fill much needed positions and remain competitive with other jurisdictions in the state. This support of the sheriff's office and the three municipal police forces must continue.

Councilwoman Chenowith's goal of a new community center in Fallston is finally nearing reality. I've witnessed firsthand how hard she has worked at ensuring that the County Executive keeps the concerns of the community at the top of the list as this project moves forward. Her constituent service has been an example for all of us on the Council to follow.

While it's important to prepare for future growth, it is equally important to move forward with projects like the Fallston community center that improve the quality of life for those of us that are here today.

When not in his role as the unofficial Council historian or out and about in his mobile office, Capt Jim has been a key figure in several new pieces of legislation during 2007. Working with Mr. Guthrie, Councilman McMahan has put in place a new community input process that requires developers to meet with the residents near any proposed new developments to discuss their issues and helpfully deal with their concerns.

Successful conclusions always begin with open communication.

Mr. McMahan also assisted in ensuring the passage of legislation that will greatly assist our volunteer fire and EMS system with recruitment and retention of personnel. They are an invaluable service to our county. The challenges they face are daunting and Harford County government has and must continue to support our fire companies as they prepare for the future.

Over the last year I'm probably most proud of the accomplishments of my Council District representative, Mr. Shrodes. He led this Council through many amendments to the agricultural land preservation program that has made it a model for other counties around the state. Mr. Shrodes worked hard with the administration on a compromise that has increased the buffer areas around the landfill to protect the deer creek watershed for future generations but still allows

the county to deal with the need for additional landfill space. His task force on dealing with Ag marketing issues just completed their work and he will be introducing legislation to follow up on the recommendations presented to the Council. Northern Harford County is well represented with Mr. Shrodes.

Today's County Executive and Council have demonstrated over the last year their strong desire to reach our land preservation goal of 55,000 acres by 2012. Accomplishing this task will be difficult. The funding source dedicated to the county's program, half percent of the transfer tax is significantly off. The state program is facing cuts due to its fiscal issues. It's time to add another tool to the box. Several jurisdictions throughout the country have implemented transfer of development rights programs that compliment their purchase of development rights efforts. Harford County's current TDR program is inadequate. We need one that creates incentives to direct growth to the areas of the county where the master plan intended for it to be. This approach not only benefits the taxpayers but protects the farmers land values.

Mr. Slutzky has been the Council's "go to guy" for education issues. During the last budget Coach Slutzky convinced the Council to support increasing the salaries of teachers to keep Harford County a desirable place to work. A proper learning environment is an important element to the growth of a child but is worthless without the right person to plant the seed. Councilman Slutzky's hometown of Aberdeen is ground zero for that four lettered word we hear so much about BRAC. Ensuring that the county does its part in assisting the town and the surrounding community to prepare for the influx of people is a responsibility he takes seriously.

The Council stands behind County Executive Craig in his efforts to build new schools. It is our hope that our state delegation not only secures additional funding for this effort but is successful in streamlining the process by which schools are built. This allows us to not only save in construction costs but open new schools much sooner.

Ms. Lisanti deals with the same issue as I, balancing a full time job with our Council duties. Her recent legislation to upgrade the requirements of the office and supporting retail district at the Route 543 interchange will result in a much higher quality project to the benefit of all of Harford County. Councilwoman Lisanti did such a good job in working with the developer and the community that both showed up at the public hearing in support of the bill. That's something that doesn't happen very often. Mary Ann represented the Council in Annapolis last year on the MACO Legislative Committee and is already hard at work in that role again this session.

It is fine to learn from the past but unproductive to dwell on it.

Where does this sophomore class go from here --

Two major issues face us in 2008

Fiscal Responsibility and Zoning Code Rewrite

Today county government relies heavily on property taxes to sustain itself. As we grow and encourage more commercial development due to BRAC it is the Council's hope to change this. To set the stage for this change the Council lowered the homestead property tax credit percentage rate for this year from 10% to 9%. This will result in significantly less revenue for county government in fiscal year 2009. No Council before us has elected to do this. We plan to go to 8% in 2010. Some have demanded we lower the rate quicker. To do so before balancing the decreases with the increases from future commercial development would greatly affect the county's ability to provide services that ensure our quality of life. We understand how rising assessments have placed a burden on property owners in the county. We live here also, but we must be responsible in how we act.

The County Executive has stepped up to answer the call. He has initiated a task force of business leaders in the community to review how government operates and provide feedback on how to improve efficiency. He has made economic development and revitalizing the Route 40 Corridor

a top priority. The upcoming budget will be all about establishing priorities especially during this economic downturn, while facing significant cost being passed down to the counties by the state. The reality is not everyone is going to get what they want. This second year Council is well prepared to work with the County Executive in achieving a successful outcome.

Right on the heels of the budget approval process will be the long overdue rewrite of the County's zoning code. The proposed new code is currently being reviewed by a work group formed by the County Executive that includes Council appointees. Once that review process is completed, the County Executive will present the Council with a recommendation for a new zoning code. The Council has been diligently following the progress of these sessions and will be working with one another over the coming months on any proposed changes or additions. This new zoning code will play an important role in how the landscape of Harford County will look in the future.

Stay tuned. It's safe to say that our summer schedule will be much more active than usual.

God bless.