

DEB'S DISTRICT UPDATE

Deb Jung • District Four

March-April 2025

Greetings

As March snuck away mildly this year, I would like to belatedly recognize Women's History Month with a brief retrospective on how far we've come. Subsequent movements — most notably Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion — have become weaponized, but fairness and justice will survive setbacks as long as we strive to achieve the meaning of the words even if the terms change.

The Women's Movement is a perfect example: campaigns that spanned centuries eventually achieved full and fair access to education and employment despite many setbacks along the way. The women's suffrage campaign started in 1847. Nondiscrimination based on sexual identity was proposed as a Constitutional Amendment (the Equal Rights Amendment) in 1923; it remains in legal limbo today. Women gained more financial independence when the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 allowed them to legally obtain credit cards without their husbands as co-signers. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace but it took decades for the office culture to comply. I grew up in the 1970s when my school forbade girls from wearing pants and the only jobs available to women on Capitol Hill were secretarial. Fast forward to the 1980s, my graduating law school class had more women than men for the first time in the law school's history and we matriculated into the workplace to change the culture and the society bit by bit.

In legislative news, my bill to stop a toxin-producing pilot plant from operating next to homes failed. Three of my Council colleagues determined that the Council doesn't have the legal authority to protect the residents' health and safety. I will never understand why Councilmembers who received endorsements from environmental groups would vote against protecting residents from possible toxic exposure. More about the vote on the following pages.

Deb

Council Updates

CB11 Research and Development Laboratories in Planned Employment Center (PEC)

I filed this bill so that employment centers located in PEC zoning districts can conduct important research and development activities as a matter of right. I also filed Amendment 2 that corrected the technical language and added "whereas" clauses that explained the Council's legal authority to protect the health and safety of the residents through the Zoning Regulations.

This bill was accused of being a special law by three of my Council colleagues, who used this reason for their "no" votes. Councilmembers Rigby, Jones, and Yungmann all voted against CB11 and lectured the large crowd in the Banneker Room about how they couldn't exercise their legal duty to protect them.

A special law unfairly targets one entity and can be overturned by the courts. If the special law argument were as broad-sweeping as my colleagues contend, then no government would ever be able to make a regulatory change for fear that the entity that created the impetus for the law would be unfairly targeted.

Unfortunately, my assurances that the Council is empowered to protect health and safety of the public through the Zoning Regulations failed to garner an additional vote for the successful passage of the bill.

Here is my voting statement from March 3: "The community of Cedar Creek has been on an emotional rollercoaster ride since the announcement that a pilot manufacturing plant



WR Grace chemical testing facility and Cedar Creek Neighborhood. A buffer of only 200 feet separates homes from a proposed plastic conversion plant that requires an air emission permit.

View Council Sessions: click here.

would be taking up residence right next to them. Through the two nights' of testimony, we heard that families are afraid for their safety, feel lied to by the real estate agents, and distrust the officials tasked with protecting their health and safety. A pilot plant running huge equipment for 16 hours a day to convert plastics into oil and gas is a manufacturing activity that does not qualify as a non-conforming use and should be a prohibited activity in employment zones, often located near residential neighborhoods. Pilot plants dealing with chemical conversions of plastics are manufacturing and should occur in manufacturing zones.

Live-work-play is our County's unofficial motto but a small-scale manufacturing plant is not live- or play-friendly. Siting a petrochemical pilot plant next to a neighborhood goes beyond anything I would have ever imagined would be logically possible.

This ZRA is not a special law since it applies to an entire class of research and development laboratories. It is fully within the Council's authority as the legislative and zoning body to define compatibility of uses. The Maryland Court of Appeals (now known as the Maryland Supreme Court) has ruled in favor of other legal protections for the public from bad actors seeking profits. The Court wrote in one case involving a landfill next to a waterway that 'Even some special laws … do not fall within the constitutional prohibition, provided that the legislation addresses special evils with which existing general laws are incompetent to cope.' A pilot plant converting plastics into oil and gas next to residences is simply a special evil that requires legislative action.

But this chemical testing facility predates the houses so what's the big deal you might think? Apparently three of my colleagues think that there is no problem with toxic air pollution next door to homes and aren't voting in favor of CB11. This land used to be owned by the chemical testing facility and the land provided an important safety buffer between its activities and the nearest homes. That buffer was sold at a significant profit ($13M) and rezoned and redeveloped into houses for an even more significant profit ($30M), leaving a meager 200-foot setback between polluting activities and people trying to raise young children. Profits over people.

CB11 supports jobs by reinstating Research and Development, which if done on a small scale produces no regulated emissions and supports the work of many local employers. But when Research and Development is used as an excuse to conduct manufacturing activities that create toxic emissions near homes,

Council Updates

then the Council must act to limit this activity. The health and safety of our community must come first in our land-use decisions. CB11 puts people over profits. It is the least we can do."

WR Grace Chemical Conversion Plant

Hearing Examiner Appeal

April 29 Continuation

Aidan and Sara Morrell filed an appeal (BA813D) of the Department of Planning and Zoning's determination that the proposed chemical conversion pilot plant was consistent with the property's non-conforming use.

The first hearing occurred on March 18. WR Grace's attorney Tom Coale asked the Hearing Examiner to dismiss the case because zoning violations cannot be prospective. The Hearing Examiner denied this request. The petitioner's attorney then presented the case, explaining that a pilot plant is a more intensive use than WR Grace's non-conforming use of research and development. A former industry expert testified that pilot plants are an interim step between lab testing and full-scale manufacturing. He indicated that the description of work in the MDE air permit submitted by WR Grace omitted important information about the operations of the pilot plant and the types of solvents used to breakdown the plastic pellets into oil and gas components. Visit the Hearing Examiner's case number BA813D webpage for a video of the proceeding.



Rally for CB11 in front of the George Howard Building prior to the vote on March 3.

Council Updates

March-April Legislation

Legislation was introduced on March 3 and will be voted on April 7.

CB18 Tax Breaks & APFO Exemptions for Apartments in TOD

Allows residential developments in transit-oriented development (TOD) zones to receive tax breaks (payment in lieu of taxes) if 15% of the units charge reduced rents for individuals living off of disability income. This bill also exempts all residential projects in TOD (even if they are 100% market rate) from the school capacity test in APFO. The bill also freezes the school surcharge rate for TOD projects at the rate in effect at an earlier development phase than other developments in other zoning districts. *Sponsored by Councilmember Christiana Rigby*

CB20 Surplus Funds for School Capital Projects

Currently the County Executive can allocate surplus funds from the prior fiscal year to Capital projects and Operating expenses. In the past, these funds have been used for school maintenance projects, the North Laurel Pool, as well as one-time funds to local non-profits. The County Council also has the ability to make cuts to the budget to increase funding to the school's Capital and Operating Budget as long as the increases don't exceed the Board of Education's funding request. This bill "allows the use of excess surplus revenue from prior fiscal years for deferred capital needs of Howard County Public School System for the FY2026 Capital Budget." The bill has no further action after FY2026. *Sponsored by Councilmember Liz Walsh*

CB17 Reestablishes the Geothermal Tax Credit

This bill reinstates the a phased out tax credit for geothermal equipment. *Sponsored by Councilmember Christiana Rigby*

CB19 Elimination of No-Tell Motels

Prohibits hotels and motels from charging by the hour for a lodging room. *Sponsored by Councilmember Liz Walsh*

CB16 Reports Webpage

Certain County Departments and related entities are obligated by law to provide annual reports to the County Council. This bill requires those reports to be posted to the Council's webpage. The Council has the independent authority over its website and doesn't require specific legislation to take action. *Sponsored by Councilmember Liz Walsh*

Read current Legislation: click here.

Council Updates

FY26 Capital Budget

The County Executive submitted the FY26 Capital Budget to the Council on April 1. The budget totals $367 million and includes the following sources of funds:

- $79.4 million in General Obligation (GO) bonds
- $74.8 million in surplus funds (PAYGO)

Notable Projects:

- HCPSS: $100.6 million in County and State funds.
- Howard Community College: $5 million towards the Workforce Development and Trades Center
- Howard County Library System: $5 million released from contingency for a new Downtown Columbia library.
- North Columbia Fire Station: $500,000 for design and permitting
- Howard County's Detention Center: $3.2 million for renovations
- Elkridge Community & 50+ Center: $25 million for planning, design, and construction
- Pedestrian & Bicycle Improvements: $13.8 million

The FY26 Operating Budget will be released on April 16. The Council will hold several public hearings and work sessions in April and May to review the budget.

Upcoming Meetings

- April 7, 7pm: Legislative Session
- April 14, 6pm: Budget Public Hearing
- April 16, 10am: Budget Work Session
- April 21, 10am: Budget Work Session
- April 21, 7pm: Legislative Public Hearing
- April 23, 10am: Budget Work Session
- April 23, 6pm: Budget Public Hearing
- April 28, 9:30am: Work Session
- April 28, 10am: Budget Work Session

Click here for more.



Resources for Federal Workers

Despite several court wins, Federal workers will continue to experience job eliminations. The County and the State have the following resources for job seekers.

Howard County Job Openings

Preference for open positions with the County Government is being given to impacted Federal workers. Search the County's job opportunities webpage.

Columbia Workforce Center

This center assists job seekers with training, resume building, and job searches. Visit the County's Workforce Development webpage.

Howard County Economic Taskforce

The County Executive recently announced the creation of a taskforce to identify and recommend policies, strategies, and actions to strengthen the County's competitiveness and growth. More information is available on the County's News webpage.

State of Maryland Resources

The State's Labor Department hosts online resources for Federal workers who have lost or are at risk of losing their jobs. The webpage contains information about unemployment insurance, virtual workshops, and listings for in-person job fairs. Visit the Federal Government Transition webpage on the State's Labor Department website.

Maryland Public Servants Resource webpage has information on unemployment insurance, career transitions, health coverage, veterans resources, food assistance, and legal help. Visit the program's webpage for more.



Teaching as a Second Career

Governor Moore announced Teach Maryland, a new program to assist former Federal workers interested in pursuing second careers as teachers. Visit the Teach Maryland website for more information.

Job Listings & Job Fairs

- Maryland Jobs contains a listing of positions in cybersecurity, engineering, healthcare, and more. Visit the Live Work Maryland website.
- Seeking New Opportunities After Work as a Federal Employee or Contractor is a 3-hour, weekly workshop for career changers. Email FedWorker.Transition@maryland.gov.
- Federal Workers Career Fair will be held on April 8, 6-8pm, Howard County Economic Development Authority, 6751 Columbia Gateway Drive. Visit EDA's Events webpage for more information.

General Assembly Updates

FY2026 State Budget

The General Assembly is still negotiating the final terms of the State's FY26 budget that grows revenues by $1.6 billion through new or increased taxes and makes an additional $500 million in cuts beyond the Governor's initial proposal to reduce spending by $2 billion. The State is facing a $3.3 billion shortfall.



As of March 26, leadership of the House of Delegates and the Senate had agreed to the following:

Tax & Fee Changes

- income tax increase on individuals earning above $500,000 to 6.25% (from 5.75%) and above $1 million to 6.5% (from 5.75%). High-income earners are anticipated to pay $1800 more on average due to this increase.
- new 3% tax on information technology and data services, expected to generate $500 million in State revenues
- cannabis sales tax increase to 12% (from 9%)
- sports betting tax increase to 20% (from 15%)
- standard deduction increase by 20% ($3350 for individuals and $6700 for joint filers)
- itemized deductions elimination for filers earning more than $200,000
- new 2% surcharge on capital gains income of more than $350,000
- new vending machine sales tax (6%)
- local income tax cap increase to 3.3% (from 3.2%)
- additional $500 million in government spending cuts from the Governor's initial proposal
- Enterprise Zone tax credit preserved

On March 28, the State Senate announced reconsideration of an excise tax on vehicles increase to 6.88% (from 6%) after President Trump threated a 25% tariff on imported vehicles and auto parts.

Cost Shifts to the Counties

The Governor had proposed to cut $1.6 billion in statewide education funding and shift some of those costs to the Counties. Howard County was anticipated to bear an additional $9 million in school related expenses due to these changes.

General Assembly Updates

On March 25, the State Senate adopted about half of the Governor's initial reductions. Here are the Senate's current proposals:

- teacher retirement cost shift to the Counties reduced, bringing the total shift down to $97.7 million (from $195.5 million)
- gradual phase out of teacher retirement supplemental grant, shifting $13.8 million total on to Counties
- four-year pause on the implementation of the Blueprint-required teacher planning time (called "collaborative" time)
- community schools funding restored
- per pupil funding increase reduced from $9226 to $9063

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) reported that the Counties will provide approximately $1.4 billion more in local school funding than is mandated by the State's funding model for the education improvement plan (called Blueprint).

Underfunding by the State for Blueprint-related programs results in an additional $1 billion in special education costs and $500 million in student transportation costs to the Counties annually. The Counties are mandated to provide these services without the adequate financial supports from the State.



Banneker Student Artwork Showcase

Every year, a rotating exhibit of student artwork decorates the walls of the Banneker Room where the Council meets for Legislative Sessions and Public Hearings. Here I am with one of the featured artists. These works make me so happy to look at and I hope the students feel honored that their work is displayed where local laws are made.

HCPSS

Board of Education Budget Request

The Board of Education (BOE) adopted its FY26 Operating and Capital Budget requests during its meeting on March 4. Visit HCPSS FY26 Budget webpage for the BOE-approved request to the County Executive.

The FY26 Operating request totals $1.257 billion, a 9.77% ($111.9 million) increase over last year. The County's share of that total is $868 million. Highlights include adding instructional team leaders, middle school assistant principals, and restoring instructional team leaders to high school. The budget also anticipates $5.5 million reduction in State aid, $2.5 million cost shift in special education non-public tuition, and $6.8 million increase in teacher retirement costs due to education cuts at the State level.

The FY26 Capital Budget totals $100.64 million for renovation/addition of Oakland Mills Middle School, design of the renovation/addition of Dunloggin Middle School; other systemic renovations and modernizations across the system.

Junior/Senior Art & Photo Exhibition

April 5-27

The public is invited to attend the 35th annual HCPSS Junior/Senior Art and Photo Exhibition at the Howard Community College Horowitz Visual and Performing Arts Center.

Spring College Fair

April 30, 6-8pm, Howard Community College

Representatives from more than 80 colleges and universities will be available to speak with rising seniors and juniors interested in pursuing college. The event will be held at Howard Community College Academic Commons Galleria. Visit the HCPSS Spring College Fair webpage to register online.

School Year Calendar Updates

The BOE adjusted the 2024-2025 school year calendar. In order to meet the State-mandated 180 days for students, HCPSS must add a day to the calendar. Barring any additional inclement weather days, the last day of school will be June 18.

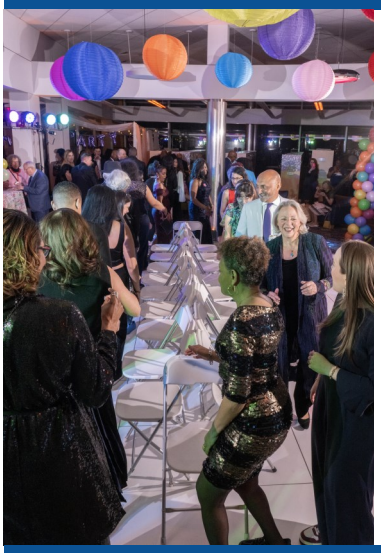
Upcoming Meetings

- April 9, 4pm & 7pm, Regular Meeting
- April 22, 7pm, Special Education Coffee & Conversation
- April 29, 4pm & 7pm, Regular Meeting & FY26 Budget Work Session
- May 8, 4pm & 7pm, Regular Meeting

Complete meeting schedule.

More school news

Keeping up with Deb







Evening at the Stacks



Bird Club Potluck



School Capital Budget Funding Announcement



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Conference at River Hill



Howard County Flag Announcement

Upcoming Events



- April 8, 6pm, Patuxent Woods Center

The Office on Aging is holding these listening sessions for residents to discuss aging issues.

Leadership U: Student Leadership

Application deadline: April 7

Leadership U is now accepting applications for rising high school juniors to develop their leadership skills. Visit Leadership Howard County's webpage for more; click here.

Columbia Orchestra

7.30pm, Jim Rouse Theater

Click here for more.

- April 5: Peter & the Wolf
- May 17: American Reflections



Hickory Ridge Community Walk

Every Monday, 10am

Meet neighbors and friends at the Hawthorne Center for a stroll through the village.

Holi Celebration 2025

April 12, 12-3pm, Merriweather Park at Symphony Woods



Battle of the Books

Howard County Library System and Howard County Public School System will host a great Battle of the Books for our county's kids on April 25 at Merriweather Post Pavilion. You can sign up to volunteer at this event.

Columbia Association Village Elections—Meet the Candidates

Villages with contested elections are hosting an event to get to know the candidates to the CA Board of Directors and Village Boards.

- **Meet the Candidate Nights:**

Hickory Ridge: Monday, March 31 (virtual) and Monday, April 7 (in-person)
Long Reach: Tuesday, April 1, 7 pm
River Hill: Wednesday, April 2, 7 pm
Wilde Lake: Thursday, April 3, 6:30 pm
Dorsey's Search: Thursday, April 10, 7 pm
Harper's Choice: Wednesday, April 16, 7 pm
Kings Contrivance: Wednesday, April 16, 7pm
Oakland Mills, Town Center, & Owen Brown have uncontested elections.