



## MY TURN By Lisa Markovitz

# Does Howard County need an Office of Inspector General?

An Office of Inspector General can be described as an independent government office able to conduct investigations to identify waste, fraud and abuse, and illegal acts, while also identifying ways to promote efficiency, accountability and integrity in government operations. Other jurisdictions have OIG's, including Baltimore County, Baltimore City, and Montgomery County. Howard County does not. We have an Auditor's office, and recently that office came under great criticism.

In March 2023, a County Council Bill (CB11) proposed adding detailed Council oversight of the County Auditor's Office. The Bill was a response to concerns raised by a recent audit investigation. In response to an anonymous report, the County Auditor's office sought to determine whether an event at the Howard County Library System Central Branch, held during library hours, restricted attendance to a private group, or was open to the public. The report was supposed to focus on the library and its policies, but also included details about individuals attending the event, such as racial and attire descriptions.

CB11 was introduced by Council Members Opel Jones and Christiana Rigby. It sought to add layers of County Council review before an audit can proceed, including audits that do not require investigations. The public hearing on CB11 required two evenings to fulfill all testimony requests. Responses included near unanimous criticism of the audit report's racial descriptions, as well as how the report appeared to investigate the group attending the event, versus the library's policies. Suggested solutions for going forward; however, were split. Many wanted to see greater oversight of the auditor's office, while fears were also noted of unintended consequences of the appearance of control or political influence on the office. Attention was paid to the issue of retaining the independence of the County auditor's office.

It is a very important industry best practice to have County auditing done by an independent County arm.

Council Member Liz Walsh introduced amendment to the Bill that covered concerns of undue increase of council involvement in the county auditing preparation details, especially eliminating that for routine County audits that do not require an investigation. Review of final reports by the Council was retained in the bill, which will help to eliminate problems such as those with the library investigation. It was good to see the Council work together to come to a unanimous vote to pass CB11, agreeing on how to handle the community's outcry for change.

The recent audit office incident and CB11 beg the question, "Does Howard County need an Office of Inspector General (OIG)?" Council Member Walsh has recently proposed Howard County institute an OIG. Over the years, community interest in County fiscal activities, responses to public information act requests, special interest political contributions, and other concerns would be alleviated by having an OIG.

County oversight of taxpayer dollars is of paramount importance, especially given our budgetary needs that compete for scarce resources. With expensive proposed capital expenditures for a new central library, school system expansion, and needed transit updates to address county growth, we need to hold the county to fiscal account to uphold public trust. This is an especially timely need with new zoning law updates coming this summer, which propose intense increases in residential growth. Council Member Walsh stated, "my hope is to begin to mend the community's trust in our local government." If you agree that an Office of Inspector General for Howard County would go a long way toward that goal, you can let the Council know, via email at [CouncilMail@HowardCountyMD.gov](mailto:CouncilMail@HowardCountyMD.gov).