

Next Howard County executive will inherit a budget balancing act



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Howard County has long been considered an enviable place to live. We consistently rank among the nation's most financially secure and healthiest of counties. Our public school system ranks as one of the highest performing in the state. Residents have come to expect excellent public benefits, including parks, libraries, public safety, and infrastructure. Those topics are the subject of serious debate and prioritization decisions when it comes to balancing financial, housing and quality of life issues.

The next county executive will discover that maintaining our stellar reputation and high rankings is becoming more and more difficult. The challenge lies in competition for resources and weighing regulation effects. Education remains the largest county budget item, and most support investing in schools. Even as county funding has reached historic levels, school officials continue to warn that rising labor costs, special education needs, transportation expenses, and inflation strain available resources. At a recent appearance at The Howard County Citizens Association annual meeting this past July, Vanessa Atterbeary, Democratic nominee for county executive, stated that, if elected, plans are in place to quickly review and implement changes to the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance that regulates development around crowded school capacity, early in the next administration. She also noted that overdue comprehensive rezoning would happen soon as well, which is typically done every 10 years, where property owners can seek to change their zoning. The last comprehensive rezoning was done in 2013. During that process, concern for adequate public services while having many properties upzoned to develop increased allowed numbers of new residences is a topic of great debate.

Howard County's high quality of life and proximity to large employment centers has created housing demand, which has contributed to rising home prices and rents. Young families, teachers, first responders, and recent graduates often struggle to afford housing in the

communities they serve. Expanding housing options could improve affordability, but increased density frequently raises concerns about traffic, school capacity, and preservation. Any administration that pursues one goal will likely face criticism from those who prioritize another. It is hoped that a balance can be found to not just increase the supply of market rate housing, which rarely automatically leads to appreciable price decreases, but also to directly increase moderate and lower income housing supplies as well.

Decisions about housing affect schools. Transportation influences economic development. Budget priorities shape every county service. Success will require weighing competing interests rather than pursuing simple answers or focusing on only one goal in one way. Commercial taxes are higher than residential revenues. There is a large Gateway area project planned that will bring more commercial space, but there is more room to explore becoming a regional destination for conferences, sports tourism, and cultural events. Merriweather Post Pavilion, the Chrysalis, Symphony Woods, youth sports complexes, and the county's park system already attract visitors. Strengthening these assets through coordinated marketing and complementary private investment could increase hotel occupancy, restaurant activity, and local business revenue.

Personally, I have witnessed Vanessa Atterbeary be balanced and effective during her years as Chair of the Ways and Means Committee in Annapolis as a Howard County Delegate. She makes crucial decisions with wide input and handles difficult tasks with integrity, seeking diverse stakeholder and community input. As we head into contentious scheduling times for updating APFO, holding Comprehensive Rezoning, and seeking to balance affordable housing with growth, and increase commercial spaces, we can be hopeful that the incoming County Executive Administration will have the experience and ability to best serve all our interests.