

Opinion | Is Howard County Government about to get more oversight?



by **Lisa Markovitz, MSF**
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For over a year now, several Council Members and civic groups have discussed the possibility of Howard County creating an Office of Inspector General. An IG provides independent investigation into government waste, fraud, abuse or illegal activity. Several other jurisdictions in Maryland have either a staffed Office or the Inspector General position alone. Some are appointed by the County Executive, while others are chosen by an advisory panel. There are differing types of oversight and control of the office, its members, and activities, across Counties.

The benefit of the County establishing an Office is that it would be a permanent fixture, and not just an employee of the County. Even just having an IG could promote efficiency, accountability and integrity in government operations.

Several areas of concern in government/community interactions that would be alleviated by an IG include independent oversight of County fiscal activities, responses to public information act requests, special interest or conflict of interest issues and more fiscal responsibility.

Getting this started in Howard County could be complicated. There is varying support for the different details involved. Who would hire/appoint the IG, and how do they operate? Other jurisdictions offer insight with interesting possibilities. In Baltimore County last year, a blue-ribbon panel did an exhaustive report on Ethics Accountability, noting best practices to implement an IG. On the one hand, IGs need to be able to do their jobs without recrimination, given whistleblower status, confidentiality, and access to information. On the other hand, the IGs power has to have supervision.

Recommendations of the Baltimore County Blue Ribbon panel included assurance that an IG be independent (not appointed by the County Executive, but by an Advisory Panel), have funding in the budget, a defined scope of authority, oversight, limited terms, a strict communication and procedural process, review periods, and interaction with the County Ethics Commission.

Howard County could learn a lot from that process and its resulting report, as it sought to iron out the growing pains of implementation in Baltimore County. Prince George's County, Baltimore City and Montgomery County have also addressed these issues, some with appointed IGs, some with a panel choosing the IG. It is time for Howard County to create the position and make these decisions.

Balancing taxpayer dollars in our local budget causes contentious debate, especially over large proposed expenditures. Often school capital updates compete with other plans such as new libraries, art centers, etc. Holding the County to more fiscal account could go a long way toward upholding public trust at a time when so many competing interests make balancing the budget a difficult and long process with political issues abounding. Howard County needs to feel more comfortable that such huge decisions and plans are backed up by inspection and review.

Inspector General local Bills will soon be introduced. Do you want to see an Advisory Board appointed by the Council and County Executive, with candidates required to have professional backgrounds, who then appoint an IG? Do you want to see the IG position required to have specific experience, certifications and ongoing training? The devil will be in the details to get a Bill passed. Please email the Council, and let them know if you think Howard County should have an Inspector General, and how they should be chosen, at CouncilMail@HowardCountyMD.gov.