

GTCC

The Greater Timonium Community Council

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There will be no general meeting of the GTCC for January 2021 as we continue to observe the restrictions in place due to the coronavirus. We wish everyone a Happy New Year.

President's Message

Random Thoughts at the Start of a New Year

Although I have been a big supporter of Governor Larry Hogan in the past, his recent actions in several matters have disappointed me greatly. Lately he seems to be too preoccupied with establishing a “national identity” as a moderate who can work on both sides of the political fence and not concerned enough about the affairs of Maryland. He still has two years left in office as governor, and I hope he devotes most of his time to the affairs in Maryland.

I am also disappointed in Hogan’s failure to fully address the questions surrounding the 500,000 coronavirus test kits that he bought from South Korea. Back in April when the test kits arrived, Governor Hogan made a big production out of their arrival and heralded the kits as a “game changing step forward”. Both the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun have recently questioned whether the test kits have even been used, and there exists the possibility that these test kits did not work properly, giving false positive results in many instances.

Hogan spent \$9.46 million for the initial 500,000 test kits, and it has been reported that he paid the same South Korean supplier another \$2.5 million for another 500,000 replacement kits. Lawmakers have pressed administration officials about how many of the original test kits have been used, but they have not gotten straight answers. Governor Hogan has compared the second purchase to that of a consumer swapping out a cell phone for a faster, better product, but he has not answered whether the original kits were so flawed that they were unusable.

Given the uncertainty surrounding all things related to the coronavirus last April, I could excuse Larry Hogan if he made a mistake in buying the first batch of test kits. If you remember at the time Dr. Fauci and others were telling us that wearing face masks had no measurable effect to our safety, among other things that the experts got wrong at that time. But for Hogan and members of his administration to continue to obfuscate information about the test kits is unacceptable.

Similarly, I do not like the optics of Governor Hogan giving 8,000 doses of the coronavirus vaccine to the District of Columbia. Had he discussed this with other state leaders, say members of the Board of Public Works, and concluded that it was the charitable thing to do to give vaccine doses to D.C., I could accept that decision. But the governor did not have the unilateral power to make that decision. Those doses were allocated by the federal government to Marylanders.

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The recent cyberattack on the Baltimore County Public Schools has also exposed a growing rift between the County Executive and the school system. In a letter sent to School Superintendent Dr, Darryl L. Williams, County Executive John Olszewski, Jr. wrote that it is troubling that the school system has not cooperated with county police, the county attorney and state information technology experts.

Much of the school system's actions after the attack shut down their computer network have been cloaked in secrecy. The public does not know if the school system had insurance to cover the cost of any attack or if a ransom was paid to the attackers, and the school system has used the ongoing criminal investigation as its' reason to avoid answering these questions to date. We do know, however, that a State Legislative Audit conducted more than a year ago criticized the school system's lax security of its' computer network. Dr. Williams points out that his personnel have an ongoing dialogue with the FBI during this event.

What strikes me is that Olszewski's letter is out of character on a couple of levels. First, the county executive has normally been one of the school system's biggest supporters, advocating for more funding for schools and generally backing their policy initiatives. Secondly, past county executives have made a practice out of treading lightly in criticism of the school system. They point out that the system is intended to be separate and distinct from local government per the Maryland constitution, and the system is supposed to be self-managed.

So Olszewski's caustic letter is a bit surprising, especially that he chose to make it public. Is the situation so fouled up regarding the cyberattack that the county executive wanted to create some distance from the situation? Or is he just very frustrated that the lines of communication have failed. We may never know the motivation for this letter.

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As we approach the start of the General Assembly session of 2021, there will be a lot of talk about overriding the governor's veto on the Kirwan education bill that the legislators passed in 2020. If you are aware of my past comments, you know that I have been highly critical of the Kirwan legislation. It is not that I am against targeted increases in educational funding, but I fear that the Kirwan legislation, which is projected to cost \$4 billion per year when fully implemented, will have the same impact as the Thornton legislation did for the state's education program. That impact was next to nothing from Thornton.

Regardless of how you feel about the Kirwan legislation, it is important to contact your delegates and senator and voice your feelings. Please also ask your legislators to identify how they intend to fully fund the Kirwan legislation, not just partially fund it as the current legislation proposes.

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Finally, I want to thank the leadership of the Maryland State Fair for the many actions that have been taken during the past year to help the greater community as we deal with this pandemic and more generally with how they have engaged with their neighbors in the Timonium area. Drive by the fairgrounds on most days and you will see that the State Fair has opened its grounds to hundreds of people who are getting tested for the coronavirus at the site. Similarly, the fairgrounds is being used as a staging area for local food distribution efforts in this time of need.

In addition, under the leadership of Gerry Brewster, Donna Myers, and Andy Cashman, we have a fairgrounds leadership that is willing to solve problems when they arise and help us make the Timonium area a better place to live.

Eric Rockel

County Introduces Interactive Data Dashboard

County Executive John Olszewski, Jr., introduced a new tool where residents can view detailed information about crime in the county. "Residents deserve to know exactly what's happening in their communities...", stated the County Executive, and "we're pleased that the dashboard shows that crime is decreasing in Baltimore County."

According to the data for the first six months of 2020, Baltimore County reported reductions in the following types of crime:

Assault: 24 % decrease	Homicides: 15 % decrease
Theft: 23 % decrease	Burglary: 35% decrease
Motor Vehicle Theft: 15 % decrease	Robberies: 30 % decrease

The interactive data dashboard provides maps, graphs and a variety of number sets to give the viewer an idea of data for different periods of time, as well as for different types of crime. In addition to this aggregate crime dashboard, there are separate dashboards that account for Use of Force complaints and a more generalized Complaint Dashboard. Readers should go to the County’s website and enter the term “interactive data dashboard” in the search box at the upper right of the home page to find this new data set.

In addition to the interactive dashboard, readers can still go to the Cockeysville Precinct page within the Police Department website to view a crime blotter of recent specific incidents.

Cautionary Remarks, Even with a Coronavirus Vaccine

James Coker is the chair of the Department of Sciences at the University of Maryland Global Campus. He recently authored a commentary piece in the Baltimore Sun, and this article is a summary of his remarks in the Sun. The viewpoint expressed in this article is that of Mr. Coker.

James Coker expresses caution when we speak about the coronavirus vaccine’s ability to return life to “normal”. He states that we need to understand herd immunity and figure out how many people in a community need to be immune before person-to-person transmittal is unlikely. For some diseases, we set an extremely high level to achieve herd immunity- measles is set at above 90%- while other viruses, like the flu, require only a 50% or better level. If a sizable portion of our residents are reluctant to take the vaccine for coronavirus, then achieving that herd immunity may be problematic.

A second area of concern involves the nature of the virus itself. The virus is new, and scientists are still learning about its behavior. Even answers to simple questions about the virus need further study, such as, “What concentration of antibody in the blood is needed to confer immunity?” and “Once the body generates antibodies, will they prevent reinfection?” or “How long will immunity from the vaccine last?” Will we need periodic booster shots? The answers to these and other questions will impact when things truly return to normal.

Finally, we will need to understand the effectiveness of a vaccine against multiple strains of the coronavirus. Recently, scientists report that a newer strain of coronavirus found in

England is far more contagious, although apparently not more lethal, than the strains encountered here in the United States. Any vaccine that is highly effective may need continuous adjustments, like the yearly modifications to the flu vaccine.

Coker concludes that we must advocate that our elected officials continue to invest in keeping us safe by encouraging people to get immunized, increase the capabilities to test more citizens on a daily-basis and conduct contact tracing on those who test positive. It also means that we will have to allocate more money for research on the coronavirus, not just in the short term, but possibly in the long term as well.

County Lowers Speed Limit on West Padonia Road

Prompted by numerous complaints from his constituents, Councilman Wade Kach asked County officials to examine the traffic accidents on West Padonia Road. Many residents felt the posted 40 mile per hour speed limit contributed to these accidents.

In the end, the Chief of the Bureau of Traffic Engineering, Greg Carski, agreed to lower the posted speed limit to 35 mile per hour on West Padonia Road, from York Road to Roundwood Road. The change in speed limit went into effect at the end of November. The Cockeysville Police Precinct will continue to patrol this stretch of road to assess the impact of a reduced speed limit on traffic movement and accidents.

Adequate Public Facilities Task Force

Created in response to a County Council resolution, Resolution 76-20, in August of this year, an eight-member task force is examining the current adequate public facilities legislation and its impact on the school system. This task force includes five members appointed by the County Council and three members designated by County agencies. Included in the appointed members are representatives from the League of Women Voters, the Maryland Building Industry Association, and the Teachers Association of Baltimore County, among others. The County agencies' designated members included representatives from the Auditor's Office, Planning Department, and the School Board.

Generally, the adequate public facilities ordinance is intended to help the County balance the impact of development with the pressure that growth places on school capacity, as well as provided for adequate infrastructure, roads, water, sewer, and public open space as a prerequisite for development approval. This task force is concentrating its attention on the impact to public schools, and it remains to be seen if this task force or others will examine the other facilities components in the future.

To date the task force has conducted six meetings, as well as a public hearing held on December 16. They have discussed how other jurisdictions address adequate facilities, how

our own school system measures current and projected capacity of schools, the impact of changing demographics in our communities on school capacity and projections, an overview of overcrowded schools in the County and other related topics.

The final recommendations from the task force have not been released as of Christmas, but some of the options include changing the formula for forecasting the number of students a new development may generate and determining whether the school system needs to tighten what constitutes its definition of an overcrowded school. Whatever recommendations are issued, then the County Council will need to change current law to make an impact. In addition, it remains to be seen if the County will also examine topics like the adequacy of roads, storm drains, water, sewer, and parks as part of the public facilities discussion.

A Call for More BCPS Transparency and Accountability

Below is an op/ed piece written by Senator Chris West and Councilman David Marks that was submitted to the Baltimore Sun, just before Christmas.

This month, instruction for the Baltimore County Public School system was disrupted by a ransomware attack, the costs of which are still not known.

We would like to thank the personnel who are working to correct the problem, as well as educators, students, and their families for their patience. There are still many questions about this attack, including whether the school system paid the ransom and why security protocols were not in place as previously recommended by Maryland state auditors.

The budget for the Baltimore County Public School system regularly exceeds \$2 billion. When combined with community colleges and libraries, education funding exceeds 60 percent of all County expenditures. Education is rightfully prioritized in Baltimore County, but taxpayers have many legitimate questions about whether those resources are being spent wisely.

For example, during the administration of Superintendent S. Dallas Dance, parents raised concerns about the costs of an initiative to provide laptop computers to all 113,000 students at that time. County Councilmembers have often questioned the high cost of school construction compared to other jurisdictions. And just recently, legislators have sought basic details from the school system about its response to the ransomware attack.

At the request of Baltimore County's elected officials, over the course of the past several weeks, the Baltimore County Public School leadership has held private meetings with the Baltimore County State Senators, the Baltimore County Council, and the Baltimore County House Delegation to discuss the ransomware attack. During these conversations, the school officials made little effort to level with the elected representatives of the citizens of Baltimore County. Instead, there was simply a stonewall.

No questions were asked which could compromise the ongoing investigation into the ransomware attack. Rather, reasonable questions were posed, but every question was met with a recitation of pre-scripted talking points. No information was divulged. Was personal information about students and their families accessed by the hackers? No answer. If personal information about students and their families was obtained by the hackers, will the affected families be notified? No answer. If a decision is made to notify the affected families, how long will the school system wait to provide that notification? No answer. Has any taxpayer money been paid to the hackers? No answer. Would the Baltimore County Public School system permit Baltimore County to conduct an audit of how taxpayer money is being spent? Answer: No.

Currently, Maryland law does not permit the County Council to place any conditions on the funding of Baltimore County Public Schools. The Council can only cut, and once the budget is passed, the School Superintendent and Board of Education can shuffle money around to make the difference.

The County Council should have broader power over the school system's budget, including the ability to set conditions on spending and to directly audit spending. The Maryland General Assembly has the power to “fence off” money in the State Budget in order to force the Governor to accede to General Assembly priorities. Unless the Governor complies with the conditions imposed upon the “fenced off” money by the General Assembly, the money cannot be spent. The County Council should have the same power with respect to the Baltimore County School System that the General Assembly has with the Governor. We will be supporting legislation in the 2021 session of the Maryland General Assembly to give the Baltimore County Executive and County Council that power.

As we talk to taxpayers around the county, educational accountability and transparency are long overdue--and that reforms can find broad acceptance in Annapolis this spring.

Virtual Forum Date Set

The Baltimore County Commission for Women has set a date of January 19th, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., for women to participate in its final virtual countywide forum. It is an opportunity for women to voice their thoughts on the top issues facing Baltimore County women, and it will help shape the commission’s priorities for the upcoming year and beyond.

To register for this online event, go to <https://tinyurl.com/bccwvoices2021>.

County Files Lawsuit Against E-Cigarette Maker

Citing the need to divert resources and take action to protect public health, Baltimore County filed a lawsuit against e-cigarette manufacturer, JUUL Labs. The County alleges that JUUL Labs intentionally markets its products to children and has spread deceptive information about its products.

According to the lawsuit, JUUL has used advertising techniques that have been banned for tobacco products, such as using bright, fun themes that attract young people, as well as advertising on websites for children, such as Nick Junior and the Cartoon Network.

County Attorney James R. Benjamin, Jr., states that "... a new public health crisis which has created a new generation of people addicted to nicotine- while profiting billions of dollars in the process" of JUUL's actions. The County joins five other Maryland jurisdictions who have taken legal action against JUUL.

State Tax Revenues Decline During the Pandemic

Maryland's Director of the Bureau of Revenue Estimates, Andrew Schaufele, reports that revenue is expected to be down an estimated \$609 million in fiscal year 2021 and projected to take a \$300 million drop for fiscal year 2022. These losses are not as bleak as originally forecasted, but still substantial. The lowest paid residents- including those in the food services, arts and entertainment, and recreation sectors- have felt the most impact.

In a similar vein, James Ports, Director of the Maryland Transportation Authority, states that toll revenues are also down for the year by approximately 13%. Ports indicated that this drop in revenues would delay certain capital projects, such as bridge repair, that are funded by the tolls.

County Welcomes New Library Director

Sonia Alcántara-Antoine will take over as the new library director beginning in February. She replaces Paula Miller, who retired in September after six years on the job.

Ms. Alcántara-Antoine comes from the Newport News Public Library system, where she served as the director of libraries and information services. Before working in Newport News, she worked for seven years at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. For part of that time, she acted as an assistant to Carla Hayden, who served as Pratt's chief executive officer before being confirmed as Librarian of Congress.

The County's library system has the largest budget amongst all systems in the state, and it is one of the largest lending systems in the country.

Dulaney & Towson High Schools Need Your Help

In the last newsletter we alerted readers of the new consultant's study that stated neither Towson High nor Dulaney High should be replaced. Now the other shoe appears to have dropped because when the School Administration submitted its fiscal year 2022 capital budget to the School Board, the Administration recommended that both high schools be renovated, not replaced.

Councilman Wade Kach calls this decision a slap in the face to community leaders and elected officials, and he points out that the School Administration did not make elected officials aware of the change before submitting the capital budget.

Councilman Kach is asking that all interested residents send an email to the Board of Education at boe@mybcps.info to voice your displeasure to the change in the budget and to support new construction of both schools.