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Prince George's County

Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair
Education Subcommittee
Environment Subcommittee

Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Administrative,
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Dear Friend,

This session I've directed much of my effort to improving our community, offering solutions to our state's economic situation, and addressing education and environmental issues. Now that the session has adjourned, I want to offer a brief update on some of these issues. As you'll see, this session ended with mixed results.

Close to Home: Local Concerns

Locally, the delegates and I were able to secure funding for **Hyattsville** to begin the design and construction of the Hamilton Street Parking Garage and for **Riverdale Park** to continue the expansion of their Town Hall to include a Youth and Community Center.

A bill failed this year to authorize a casino in our County. I have long opposed gambling as bad public policy and a 'voluntary tax' on the poor. This bill would also have lined the pockets of current casino owners, by decreasing the percentage of casino revenue directed to the state. While the bill failed, it may be considered at a special session of the legislature later this spring.

Education Reforms

I introduced—and steered to passage—legislation that protects students enrolled in **online colleges** from deceptive practices. Online higher education is a mostly unregulated industry. Many students enrolled in online colleges accrue large student debt and frequently fail to graduate in the timeframe recruiters advertise. The bill establishes consumer protections for Maryland students, requires a refund policy for class withdrawal, creates a guarantee fund to compensate students if a college breaches a contract or goes bankrupt, and grants the state authority to investigate and sanction colleges up to \$20,000 that violate the law.

The school **drop-out age** will rise from 16 to 17 starting in the 2015-2016 school year and then to 18 for the 2017-2018 school year. Our County has the highest dropout rate in the state.

A separate provision known as 'Maintenance of Effort' ensures the county continues to make **school funding** a priority and prohibits a reduction in per pupil spending.

The Budget and Taxes

The legislature failed to agree on a budget and tax plan, triggering unacceptable cuts to education, public safety, and social programs. These cuts do not reflect our priorities and could have been avoided. I'm hopeful that a tax plan can be agreed to at a special session of the legislature later this spring to restore these funds.

Legislation to force corporations to pay their fair share, also failed again this year. There was an early suggestion to raise the gas tax, but that never came to a vote this session.

While proposals to shift teacher pension costs to the counties failed this session, I expect them to come up again at a special session. I voted against the pension shift and will fight to minimize the effects of any shift in the future.

Marriage Equality

On March 1st, 2012, Governor O'Malley signed the Marriage Equality bill and Maryland became the 8th state to legalize gay marriage. I was proud to be a co-sponsor of the bill and cast my vote in support of it. I strongly believe that gay and lesbian families should have the same rights accorded to heterosexuals. While some may disagree with this law, I believe that history will view this as a 21st century civil rights triumph.

Energy and the Environment

This year saw several wins for the environment.

The legislature passed the **Sustainable Growth and Preservation Act** to limit new subdivisions on septic systems in our rural areas. Septic tanks are a growing source of pollution entering our waterways and the Bay and these developments are destroying our farms and green space.

I sponsored successful legislation banning the addition of **arsenic** to chicken feed. Chicken manure used as fertilizer creates the potential for arsenic runoff and leaching into state waters. Perdue stopped using feed with arsenic in 2007. McDonald's also prohibits feed with arsenic. Why should a known carcinogen be added to poultry feed if it's not essential?

I strongly supported the **Offshore Wind** bill which, unfortunately, failed this session. This legislation would have moved Maryland towards construction of 40 wind turbines off the coast of Ocean City, creating about 2,000 jobs. Without offshore wind, it will be difficult to meet our state's renewable energy goals and reduce our reliance on dirty, coal power plants.

The General Assembly also passed legislation I introduced to encourage **recycling in condos and apartment buildings**. This bill will benefit the environment while cutting spending on landfills and trash disposal. While Prince George's County already offers multi-unit recycling to its residents, this bill will require all cities and counties in Maryland to follow suit.

In an effort to "Go Green," reduce litter and improve the environment, I introduced a bill to reduce the use of disposable bags. It would have imposed a **fee on disposable bags**, a fee already imposed in Montgomery County and Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, the bill was voted down in a House Committee. We'll try again next year.

Sincerely,



Senator Paul G. Pinsky
District 22