



MY TURN

Lisa Markovitz

School board needs to dig deeper

Budget crunches are not new to Howard County and the pandemic will create fiscal shortfalls.

Do our Board of Education (BOE) members have the skills and desire to dig into the annual 10-inch budget binder and find cuts that will create the least harm to our students and to the quality of the Howard County Public School System?

The HCPSS is the golden goose that attracts people and businesses and creates high economic value. Well, the goose is in danger; if the BOE keeps choosing the easy, low-hanging fruit of increasing class sizes and cutting negotiated educator funding and special education. These go-to cuts are chosen too quickly. We need the BOE to dig deeper.

Fiscal management of our school system cannot be left to a few supervisory roles in the HCPSS Administration. The BOE must take more responsibility for this work and dig into procurement issues, contracts, bloated administrative costs and perks, transportation and other areas of efficiency, and stop just making cuts that have the worst direct effect on our students.

During this year's election, Howard County chose new members for our BOE.

The process changed. In the past, all seven of the BOE were elected countywide, at-large, this year five of the seven were elected by districted races by County Council area.

Many are happy that the BOE will now have members from every area of the county. It is also important to have a good cross section of skills. Data research and fiscal skills were touted in the election season, which are just as important as strong social positions, because we cannot improve any programs without funding.

We have seen, over and over, votes that lead to further classroom crowding and decreased teacher resources. As we move toward commendable goals of equity, inclusion, closing achievement gaps and addressing depressed reading comprehension scores, we need to remember that ANY improvement goal, ANY position on school system issues, requires funding.

How is it serving any, much less all students, if the first place for cuts is instruction, where direct decreases are in services in the classrooms?

If we had more in-depth analysis done, we could expect actual improvements.

“Even prior to the pandemic, health concerns existed about overdue maintenance of the HVAC systems, including mold problems.”

One expense that should have been highly prioritized is upgrading the HCPSS's HVAC systems. Many places of business have installed UV light air scrubbers into their HVAC systems to address pandemic safety indoor air quality needs.

What is more important than our students' safety upon coming back to schools?

Even prior to the pandemic, health concerns existed about overdue maintenance of the HVAC systems, including mold problems. Over the years, if the budget had been managed better, maybe we would have the ability to prioritize this most important need.

This election cycle was very contentious, even locally, and especially in some BOE races. Now that the dust has settled, we need our BOE to work on all their goals and positions but keep in mind that the only way they can succeed is to create a more in-depth budget process.

Finding more productive and efficient ways to balance the HCPSS budget is the only way to keep those campaign promises to serve all.

Serving all starts with not harming, that means safety and prioritizing instructional needs.

Our county's reputation, which attracts people and businesses and increases economic value, depends on it, but more importantly, our students and teachers deserve it.

Lisa Markovitz, MSF, is president of the Maryland civic/political group, The People's Voice.

YOUR TURN

Share your views on this month's My Turn. Submissions must be signed, include a phone number and email address. Please keep your comment to 250 words or less and send them to info@bizmonthly.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Eliminate 'fee in lieu of' development

I appreciate Lisa Markovitz's article, "Can we get affordable housing more affordable" (TBM, September).

I totally agree with that: "this 'fee in lieu of' has created a concentration of AFUs in areas with lower-priced housing."

I am seeing a few low-income housing projects are being proposed in the low-income neighborhoods now. Our advocates on affordable housing either from the community, the county council or the county government should work to remove this "pay as you go" approach.

The county has the legal authority to set the criteria for the new development to meet both the affordable housing requirement and APFO standards. We should not allow developers to set this policy.

There are several key questions to be

answered. What is a reasonable level and distribution of affordable housing units in the whole county? How much more development the county can consume in each area considering APFO?

Please take consideration of the cost of infrastructure (school capacity, for example) as another key parameter. What is the highest percentage of affordable housing which will prevent developers not building houses in Howard County anymore?

I hope this kind of information is publicly available for our county residents to see and understand and guide our policy-makers on new housing developments.

Dr. Chao Wu
Board Member of Howard County Board of Education

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