

Testimony by Hiruy Hadgu

08/24/2021

CR111-2021, CR117-2021, and CR118-2021

A few years ago, a member of the Columbia Democratic Club, Mr. Bob Ford was appointed to the Human Rights Commission. He went on to serve as the Chair of this Commission in 2020. During his tenure as Chair, Mr. Ford declined to stand for undocumented immigrants who were detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at the County's detention center. Instead of standing with the immigration advocates, he covered for the County Executive's incomprehensible resistance to cancel the contract. Even though Mr. Ford finally voted to cancel the contract, it was too late. The fate of the contract was sealed after a state-level bill was passed to cancel all contracts in Maryland.

Why is this important?

The County Council is currently considering four political appointments put forward by the County Executive and Councilmember Rigby. These political appointments are either a reward for creating the toxic political culture in the County, for participating in the disruption of the Columbia Democratic Club's meetings when it actively engaged in calling out the County Executive's terrible misdeeds, or simply a plan to put in place the right people in the right positions to help advance a developer interest.

I urge the county council to vote no on these appointments as I am not confident it is in the public interest. Much like the unfortunate events at the Human Rights Commission, vulnerable members of the public will take a back seat in the interests of advancing party of political goals.

CR111-2021: I oppose the appointment of Reverend Regina M. Clay to the Howard County Local Children's Board.

The Board states that "[r]ecently, The Board identified priorities and designed strategies to help ensure Howard County is a place where all children can thrive."

The Board goes on to identify the priorities as follows:

- Affordable and Quality Education and Training
- Increase Inclusiveness, Awareness and Coordination of Resources to Meet the Needs of Each Community
- Access to Affordable and Quality Behavioral Health Care

I fail to see how Reverend Clay can successfully discharge the priorities identified by the Board. Reverend Clay is a founding member of The Rouse Project, a dark-money developer-funded group, which was established to take over the Columbia Association by replacing existing CA Board of Directors with candidates who would support Howard Hughes Corporation's quest to "control cities." This group cynically used the benevolent goals of diversity and equity to rile up the residents of Columbia, even though it had a very transparent agenda of using public

property and tax dollars for private gain thereby creating inequity and affecting the very goals of the Local Children's Board.

Someone who works with such a group should not be in such an important position. I urge you to vote no on this appointment.

CR117-2021: I oppose the appointment of Ms. Sabina Taj to the Howard County Library System Board of Trustees.

Ms. Taj's appointment will benefit Howard Hughes Corporation in its quest to "control cities." Since her election to the Board of Education, Ms. Taj has openly collaborated with developers to advance their interests.

As BOE member, Ms. Taj used her platform to advance the development industry's agenda. One such event was hosted by an entity called Center Maryland, a developer-funded lobbying and PR group that works closely with the Democratic establishment.

The development industry in Howard County has played a major role for the inequities and lack of affordable housing in Howard County. Instead of standing with community members and condemning their actions, Ms. Taj used her platform to advance their interests by appearing as a featured speaker at an event hosted by Center Maryland and the Maryland Building Industry Association in a "conference" on educational equity and housing affordability. A clear misalignment of interests and dereliction of responsibility.

More recently, she was the founding member of The Rouse Project, a dark-money group, established for the express purpose of controlling the Columbia Association Board. At the time, community leaders such as former County Executive Liz Bobo shared their concerns and raised alarms by calling out the not-so-benevolent goals of The Rouse Project and urging the public to reject them.

It is no secret that TRP was funded by Howard Hughes Corporation. However, the entity has yet to come clean about its sources of funds.

Given that Ms. Taj chose to participate and lend her platform to an entity that has shown clear disdain to transparency, I am troubled that she is under consideration for a public position where transparency and a track-record of advancing the public interest are a prerequisite.

This appointment is a choice made by Howard Hughes Corporation to advance the interests of Howard Hughes Corporation.

Please vote no on this appointment.

CR118-2021: I oppose the appointments of Mr. Michael Butera and Ms. Ainy Haider-Shah to the Compensation Review Commission.

As stated, Mr. Butera's appointment appears to be some sort of a reward for playing a major and consequential role in the disruption of the Columbia Democratic Club meetings. While Mr. Butera appeared conciliatory and spoke about fiduciary responsibility at the Club meetings he did not appear interested to learn more about the Club Treasurer's lack of fiduciary responsibility.

There did not appear to be any impartiality in his behavior and he succeeded along with Reverend Clay in shutting down the Club's attempt to get to the bottom of the inconsistencies observed by some of the Club officers in the Club's finances. I am concerned that an appointment put forward to reward such behavior does not serve the public interest.

In a recent statement, Councilmember Rigby stated that she nominated Ms. Ainy Haider-Shah because she is a "strong advocate for pay equity in the workplace, she has experience working in multiple governmental agencies, and she has experience in human resources and staffing." She goes on to say, "[m]y goal was to nominate someone who would approach the Commission with a lens of pay equity and someone who has work experience in both HR and in government."

While I appreciate all the "hot-button" keywords that rile people up in Councilmember Rigby's statement, such as "equity", Ms. Haider-Shah has played a key role in the toxic rhetoric that often grips the county. She often engages in smears and participates in appalling levels of cyber-bullying in order to silence critics of the Democratic Establishment.

Many know that I am a vocal critic of the developer influence in the county's politics and the impact on equity. I am okay being the target of any criticisms including the vicious ones lodged by Ms. Shah. However, I am not okay with any attempts to silence me by putting my family in danger by disclosing my address.

Ms. Haider-Shah along with other members of the Howard County Democratic Party were part of such an effort after I published a report that raised concerns about The Rouse Project's plans to siphon taxpayer dollars on behalf of Howard Hughes Corporation. Reverend Regina Clay and Ms. Taj, who are nominated to the Local Children's Board and the Library System Board of Trustees, respectively are members of The Rouse Project.

It is unfortunate that Councilmember Rigby thought someone who engages in cyber-bullying and intimidation tactics is appropriate for this appointment. I hope the rest of the county council does not agree.

Please vote no on this appointment.