
Jewish Federation of Howard County Testimony to Support Rabbi Craig Axler HCIAC Nomination

From Mary Haar <mary@jewishhoco.org>

Date Fri 10/2/2026 8:26 AM

To CouncilMail <CouncilMail@howardcountymd.gov>

Cc Rebecca Feldman <chair@jewishhoco.org>; Jewish Community Relations Council <jcrc@jewishhoco.org>;
Craig <rabbiaxler@templeisaiah.org>

 3 attachments (369 KB)

JFHC Testimony to Support Rabbi Craig Axler HCIAC Nomination_final.pdf; image002.png; image001.jpg;

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Good morning,

Attached and below please find testimony from the Jewish Federation Howard County to support the nomination of Rabbi Craig Axler to the Howard County Interfaith Advisory Commission.

Mary Drey Haar | President & CEO

10630 Little Patuxent Parkway | Suite 400 | Columbia, MD 21044

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Dear Members of the Howard County Council,

As lay and professional leaders of the Jewish Federation of Howard County (JFHC) and its Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), **we are writing in support of Rabbi Craig Axler's nomination to the Howard County Interfaith Advisory Commission (HCIAC).**

JFHC serves the Howard County Jewish community by caring for, supporting, and enriching Jewish life in Howard County, and through its JCRC, being a voice in the community for Jewish issues and values. The JCRC focuses on building lasting relationships with all our neighbors across the County, supporting our allies from other faiths and ethnicities, civic advocacy on issues that matter to our community, and addressing antisemitism through education and responding to hate incidents.

As a member of the clergy and as a community leader, Rabbi Craig Axler is known for his commitment to interfaith work to enhance mutual understanding, and in general, the greater Howard County community. Rabbi Axler has served as member of JCRC since 2024. The JCRC has benefitted greatly from his counsel and participation, in particular through increasing our connections to the Muslim community. In his 15 years as a Howard County resident, Rabbi Axler has developed relationships with the leaders of many faith communities. Not only is Rabbi Axler committed to interfaith dialogue and relationships, but he truly believes in the power of people coming together through mutual respect and tolerance, adding to the richness of our beautifully diverse Howard County community.

Furthermore, in 2024, Rabbi Axler was nominated by County Executive Calvin Ball to participate in the Interfaith Advisory Council, demonstrating Rabbi Axler's reputation as a community leader committed to the issues of focus for the Council, including combatting hate around Howard County, including antisemitism and Islamophobia. The Council was also tasked with providing recommendations on best practices to address religious intolerance in the county, as well as social and community issues. This eventually led to the recommendation for continued work to address issues of intolerance facing faith communities and to further coordinate services to address the needs of at-risk populations in Howard County.

We believe that as a member of the HCIAC, Rabbi Craig Axler will serve our greater Howard County community with openness, care, and commitment to advancing human rights, confronting hate and intolerance, promoting dialogue, and strengthening the County's response to community needs. He truly cares about everyone. We wholeheartedly support Rabbi Axler's nomination to the HCIAC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rebecca Feldman".

Rebecca Feldman,
JFHC Board Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura Salganik".

Laura Salganik,
JCRC Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Haar".

Mary Haar,
JFHC President & CEO

Letter in Support of Rabbi Craig Axler

From Shelley Engel <shelley@templeisaiah.org>

Date Sun 10/4/2026 8:02 PM

To Walsh, Elizabeth <ewalsh@howardcountymd.gov>; Jung, Debra <djung@howardcountymd.gov>; Rigby, Christiana <crigby@howardcountymd.gov>; Yungmann, David <dyungmann@howardcountymd.gov>; Jones, Opel <ojones@howardcountymd.gov>; Ball, Calvin <cball@howardcountymd.gov>; CouncilMail <CouncilMail@howardcountymd.gov>

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October 5, 2026

Dear Howard County Council Members:

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of Temple Isaiah, we respectfully request that the Howard County Council review and take appropriate action regarding Councilmember Liz Walsh's conduct toward Rabbi Craig Axler during the Council meeting of September 22, 2026.

Rabbi Axler appeared before the Council in connection with CR129-2026, the resolution confirming his appointment to the Howard County Interfaith Advisory Commission. After Rabbi Axler concluded his remarks, Councilmember Walsh directed a series of questions toward him that, in our view, went beyond an appropriate examination of his record and instead became personal in nature.

Rather than focusing on Rabbi Axler's qualifications, experience, or ability to serve on the Interfaith Advisory Commission, Councilmember Walsh began with a reference to a private conversation she had previously held with Rabbi Axler and subsequently questioned his character and beliefs. It is notable that this line of questioning was not similarly directed toward the other individuals being considered for appointment to the Commission.

This treatment is deeply upsetting to the Temple Isaiah Board because it does not reflect the Rabbi Axler whom our congregation and the broader Howard County community have known for nearly 15 years.

Rabbi Axler has served as the spiritual leader of Temple Isaiah since July 2012. Throughout his tenure, he has consistently emphasized community, dialogue, service, and bringing people together across differences. His own biography describes his vision of Temple Isaiah as a place "*where hands are joined together in the sacred task of repairing our shattered world.*" He has demonstrated that commitment through years of service to our congregation and to the broader Howard County religious community.

As the Council is aware, this record of community engagement led to his appointment to the County's Interfaith Advisory Council by County Executive Calvin Ball, a testament to his longstanding commitment to interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

We are also concerned by Councilmember Walsh's characterization of Rabbi Axler as a "gatekeeper" and her questioning of whether he is a "trusted partner." Those characterizations are inconsistent with our experience of Rabbi Axler, his record of service and even his dealings with Councilmember Walsh.

Rabbi Axler stated during the meeting that he has personally taken every call that Councilmember Walsh has made to him, which contradicts the accusations of being inaccessible or unwilling to engage.

We are asking the Council to consider whether Councilmember Walsh's questioning of Rabbi Axler was consistent with the standards of respectful and impartial conduct expected during the Council's consideration of appointments, and if her remarks were founded on personal disagreements, rather than his qualifications. We also ask the Council to consider the impact that such questioning has on Howard County's Jewish community and on the broader goal of fostering meaningful interfaith dialogue, as her comments reinforced stereotypes about Jewish religious leadership, while giving credence to certain antisemitic beliefs towards Jewish leaders. Regardless of Councilmember Walsh's intent, the impact of those characterizations on Rabbi Axler and the Jewish community should not be dismissed.

We believe the Interfaith Advisory Commission exists to encourage understanding, cooperation, and dialogue among Howard County's diverse faith communities. Therefore, the manner in which a respected religious leader is treated during the appointment process should reflect this mission as well. It sends a message about how diverse religious leaders and members of our community can expect to be treated when they participate in civic engagement opportunities.

We therefore ask the Howard County Council to:

1. Review Councilmember Walsh's conduct and questioning of Rabbi Axler during the September 22 meeting;
2. Acknowledge the concerns raised by Temple Isaiah regarding the personal nature of that questioning and its impact on Rabbi Axler and our congregation.

Sincerely,

Temple Isaiah Board of Trustees

Shelley Engel, FSA

Executive Director

Temple Isaiah

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www.templeisaiah.org

