

Vaping advocate says Howard council should take inspiration from Baltimore law

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Howard County should follow Baltimore's lead and allow bars and restaurants to choose whether or not to allow vaping, rather than banning the practice altogether, the leader of an association of vaping businesses told the County Council Monday night.

The suggestion was part of testimony on a new bill, introduced by Democratic Councilman Jon Weinstein, that would incorporate vaping, or smoking electronic cigarettes, into the current ban on traditional cigarette smoking in public places. The law prohibits smoking in public areas, including bars and restaurants, offices, stores and open-air venues, such as sports arenas and concert pavilions.

Last November, the Baltimore City Council passed a law banning electronic cigarettes in most of the city's public places, with an exception for bars and restaurants who decide to allow vaping in their establishments.

E-cigarettes are a relatively new phenomenon in the United States -- the National Institute of Health's National Institute on Drug Abuse says they have been available to Americans since 2007.

The devices, which are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, have sparked controversy as their use has grown.

Opponents worry about their potential impact on health, while supporters say e-cigarettes are playing a role in helping smokers quit traditional cigarettes by offering up a cleaner source of nicotine.

"Vapor products are creating ex-smokers every day in Maryland, and this council should take no action that would actively discourage smokers to stop smoking," Gregory Conley, the president of the American Vaping Association, a nonprofit supported by small and medium-sized vaping businesses, told council members.

But Michaeline Fedder, government relations director for the American Heart Association, called e-cigarettes "dangerous" and pointed to lack of oversight for their manufacturers, as well as the potential for small children to accidentally drink the nicotine-containing vapor "juice" and for older ones to become addicted to vaping.

"The bottom line for us is it should be treated exactly how cigarettes are treated," she said.

Though Conley and Fedder were the only people to testify in person Monday night, six more individuals and organizations -- including the American Cancer Society and the Maryland Group Against Smoker's Pollution -- sent testimony in support of the bill.

"I work in a bar/restaurant and do not want to be forced to inhale unknown substances in my workplace!" Rosalee Bennett, who lives in Chester, Md., wrote.

Tuesday, Weinstein said he didn't expect to make any changes to his bill.

"I need to take a look at more detail that has been offered as supporting evidence" for assertions made by Conley and

Fedder, he said, but “I think right now it's pretty solid and reflects the direction I want to go.”

Garber nomination

Supporters, and a few opponents, of Susan Garber's nomination to the Planning Board turned out in force Monday night to testify on her appointment.

The high level of attendance was a deviation from the usually routine appointment process, in which council members typically approve the county executive's appointments to boards and commissions without much discussion.

Garber's appointment, however, has generated debate over the past few weeks.

While supporters point to her years of community involvement, opponents of her nomination say they object to some of her past positions, particularly a July 2014 editorial in The Howard County Times that characterized the Howard County Education Association as “greedy” and “manipulative.”

In a letter to the council, HCEA President Paul Lemle called Garber's remarks, written during a stand-still in negotiations between the union and the public school system's administration, “inflammatory” and “unfair.”

“The association has serious doubts that Ms. Garber will treat the people of our county with the kindness, dignity, and respect they deserve,” Lemle wrote.

Though most of the XX people who testified Monday night supported Garber's appointment, the council heard from 52 others, mostly teachers, who were opposed.

Savage resident Ron Coleman said he thought the critiques related to Garber's editorial were irrelevant. “The criticism lodged at her this past weekend has absolutely nothing to do with the affairs of the Planning Board,” he said.

Coleman and others said Garber's enthusiasm and experience as a former special education teacher, program director for the Johns Hopkins University/Maryland State Department of Education Center for Technology in Human Disabilities (now the Center for Technology in Education) and founder of the nonprofit AT:LAST qualified her for a role on the Planning Board, which reviews development plans for proposed projects across the county.

If appointed, Garber would replace board chair Josh Tzucker, whose five-year term ended in May. Tzucker, who is eligible to serve three more years, has said he was “surprised” by County Executive Allan Kittleman's decision not to renew his term.

Garber, who leads the Savage Community Association and has been a community volunteer and activist for many years, told the council she looked forward “to involvement at a time when the county faces new challenges and opportunities” if her appointment is confirmed.

“I'll apply the rules as written, guided by my intent to promote the health, safety and wellness of the community,” she said.

The council is expected to vote on Garber's appointment and the vaping bill in early July.

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