

# Opponents, supporters debate Howard gun bill

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**S**econd amendment advocates and people urging greater gun control in Howard County turned out to a public hearing Monday night to debate a new weapons bill before the County Council.

The legislation, introduced last month, would ban everyone but police officers and people with permission to be armed on county business from carrying a gun or other weapon on Howard County property. It's sponsored by three of the council's four Democrats, Calvin Ball, Jen Terrasa and Jon Weinstein.

Before the hearing, held at the county's government headquarters in Ellicott City, Ball explained that the idea behind the bill was to bring Howard in line with norms elsewhere.

"I think we know that if we were to go to Congress... guns wouldn't be allowed; if we go to Annapolis, guns aren't allowed," Ball said. "This is the place where people do business in Howard County, and I think it was important to make sure it's as safe for us to do business as possible."

Jeffrey Underwood, a firearms expert and licensed firearms manufacturer, disagreed that banning legally concealed weapons would make county buildings more secure.

"Rules only give the criminals carte blanche," Underwood told the council. "Each jurisdiction that has banned firearms has made the occupants more vulnerable, not safer."

Opponents of the bill argued that allowing people with concealed weapons permits to carry a gun into county buildings would do more to create a safe environment on county property than banning most firearms.

"There is no such thing as gun violence, there is only people violence," said Brian Harvey, of Highland. "I'm a father of five, I coach county sports, I'm one of the good guys – I don't want to see a responsible citizen stripped" of the right to carry a concealed weapon, he added.

They also pointed to statistics, including some numbers from testimony by Jack McCauley, the former commander of the Maryland State Police's licensing division, that suggest that gun permit holders were very unlikely to be arrested on a gun violation.

Carol Loveless, a former state delegate candidate in Ellicott City's District 9B, who lost to current Del. Robert Flanagan, a Republican, in last June's primary, said she was concerned the bill had been inspired by "misconceptions about gun laws.

"This emotion of being so afraid that people who have handgun permits are going to shoot up people – it's not true," Loveless, who owns a security company, said.

But supporters of the bill came prepared with their own statistics about gun violence in the United States. The bill itself calls gun violence "one of the leading causes of death and injury to young people in the United [States]" and pointing to a death toll from gun violence that stands at "more than 30,000 people" a year, nationwide.

"We cannot dismiss threats of violence as idle talk, just another threat to prove a point," said Shari Zaret, a former Columbia Association board member who told councilmembers about an experience during her time with CA when a resident threatened board members at a public hearing.

Both supporters and opponents of the bill brought up last year's fatal shootings at the Mall in Columbia in their testimony.

While those arguing against the bill said allowing legal guns in the mall might have saved lives, Columbia resident David Marker, speaking on behalf of grassroots group Organizing for Action, questioned their logic.

"I don't believe for one minute that, at the mall, having crossfire of people trying to shoot at [shooter Darion Aguilar] would have created a safer situation," Marker said.

Instead, he argued, removing guns from the equation would lead to fewer accidents as well as escalations of conflict.

"Many of us have been at hearings such as this at the George Howard building where angry words are spoken and voices may be raised," he said. "It never occurred to me that these individuals might have a gun."

Council member Greg Fox, a Republican from Fulton, questioned how the bill would create a safer environment in county buildings when they are not equipped with metal detectors.

"Just saying you're going to ban something does not necessarily solve anything," Fox said.

In all, seven people spoke against the gun bill, and three people spoke in support.

The legislation is up for a vote April 6.

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