



Howard County Council

George Howard Building
3430 Court House Drive
Ellicott City, Maryland 21043-4392

Deb Jung, Chair
District 4
Liz Walsh, Vice Chair
District 1
Opel Jones
District 2
Christiana Rigby
District 3
David Yungmann
District 5

Minutes – Approved

Monthly Meeting
Tuesday, March 12, 2024
Hybrid Meeting (Virtual and In-Person Meeting)
Video Streamed on <https://cc.howardcountymd.gov/watch-us>
9:30 a.m.

Councilmembers present: Chair Deb Jung, Vice-Chair Liz Walsh, Council Member Opel Jones, Council Member Christiana Rigby, and Council Member David Yungmann.

Staff present: Michelle Harrod, Council Administrator; Owen Clark, Acting County Auditor; Lori Buchman, Auditor's office; Gary Kuc, County Solicitor; Amanda Mihill, Assistant County Solicitor; Theo Wimberly, Administrative Manager; Owen Kahn, Legislative Analyst; Isaiah Anderson, Executive Assistant; and Roz Hightower, Administrative Assistant.

Administration staff, Committee Members, and Workgroup Members: Noted below.

Chair Jung opened the meeting at 9:33 a.m. and gave introductory remarks.

Agenda:

1. Comptroller Brooke Lierman – Agency Update

Comptroller Lierman introduced herself and her staff. Comptroller Lierman gave a presentation on the work of the Comptroller's office, including her role on the Board of Public works and the projects that affect Howard County and overseeing the collection of Maryland taxes. The Comptroller discussed the three core priorities her office is pursuing, including creating a more efficient and modernized government, sharing the expertise of the Comptroller's office with the public and other localities, and preparing for long term economic and taxation decisions. Comptroller Lierman discussed long term economic trends, including slow growth and labor market challenges.

Comptroller Lierman responded to questions that the Council had submitted ahead of the meeting, including if there has been a delay in the processing of tax returns and how State and local income taxes are estimated and collected. Comptroller Lierman responded to questions from the Council on how revenue estimates were looking for the State in the coming fiscal year; how the State manages multi-year revenue estimates and what may cause yearly under- or over-estimates; how Maryland compares to other states and regions in various ways including opioid abuse, women in business, and populations growth; and what the General Assembly and Governor are planning for tax increases and how it would affect the cost of living in the State.

2. Howard County Hospital ER Wait Times

Dr. Ahmed gave introductory remarks on how the hospital is working to address ER wait times, including data on the number and type of patients that come to the ER and how visitation compares to other nearby hospitals; the care spaces and resources for patients seeking psychiatric care and how the increase in psychiatric patients can reduce the number of ER facilities for other patients; the ongoing expansion of facilities for psychiatric patients from 6 spaces to 24 spaces that is expected to be completed in December 2024; how the decrease in the number of nursing homes in Howard County has an impact on hospital waiting times; capacity at the ER that is full 95%-99% of the time; the creation of an additional observation unit with 29 beds to increase the flow of patients out of the hospital and into observation; tweaks to efficiency in processes and how more substantial changes will be needed to reduce wait times; the cap system of care which decreases the cost of care but also decreases the revenue that the hospital could have used to increase capacity; and a predicted 30% decrease in waiting times if all the proposed changes are achieved.

Dr. Ahmed responded to questions from the Council on who is served by the hospital and what sills over from other regional hospitals; how the State may intervene to help Counties manage regional and Statewide ER wait time issues; whether or not there is any wasted care for patients who could be seen at urgent care or a primary care physician; if there is any desire regionally to increase the number of urgent care and primary care facilities; the feasibility of having additional clinics and physicians at the hospital; and what the hospital can communicate to the community about their resources and the role that the County has in providing emergency health coverage. Dr. Ahmed thanked hospital staff for their work.

3. Bond Rating Agency Update

Mr. Ighile gave a presentation on the County's triple-A bond rating, including how the County's economic base supports the County's ability to maintain the rating for 26 years; upcoming changes to County finances; and reasons the County meets all criteria for the bond rating. Chair Jung praised the County's record with the bond rating agencies. Mr. Ighile responded to questions from the Council on updating the website with more recent reports; changes to interest rates and how they have affected the County's ability to borrow; and the use of PAYGO.

4. Spending Affordability Advisory Committee Revenue Projections

Ms. Sun gave introductory remarks and thanked the work of the Committee. Ms. Sun gave a presentation on this year's report, including County revenue growth in the transition to normalization following the COVID-19 pandemic; FY25 reassessment by region and the factors that will impact reassessment; the current commercial property vacancy rates; potential future volatility in the income tax base; personal income growth during the pandemic and concerns about the labor and employment market; shifts in the residential unit market and how it is impacting transfer taxes and property taxes; FY26-FY30 revenue projections at 3.3% growth on average; the challenges of CIP future requests; and the Committee's final recommendations.

Ms. Sun and members of the Committee responded to questions from the Council on what number the Committee believes the County should be committing on recurring expenses and what the balance should be allocated for; how the Council reached its recommendation for GO bonds and why the recommendation was so different from the previous year; the price tags of outstanding capital projects; the proposal of a HoCo Dollars and Cents and a long term spending review to align long term fiscal planning; the feasibility of long term spending plans, either including the school system or not including the school system; and the debt service payment as a percentage of revenues. Chair Jung thanked the Committee for their work.

5. Howard County Council Cannabis Workgroup Discussion

Chair Adibe gave introductory remarks and a presentation on the work of the Cannabis Workgroup. The Workgroup responded to questions from the Council on the potential challenges to the business industry; what support there is for minority-owned cannabis businesses; concerns that there may not be enough supply for new dispensaries; rent support for businesses struggling to afford store space; how the supply chain in the cannabis industry works; concerns about encouraging new grow facilities if there are specific requirements for Howard County facilities; whether or not the County needs to add cannabis businesses to the zoning table; if grow facilities should be limited to agriculture or should be allowed in commercial districts as well; if vacant office and commercial space could be converted into cannabis businesses; the Workgroups understanding of the issue of driving under the influence and what the police can do to enforce safe driving laws; if there is any update on the ability to test for cannabis at a roadside traffic stop and if there is a legal limit on how much cannabis can be ingested before it is illegal to drive; who regulates the content of cannabis; what the County can do to educate and inform users in the County; how employees work in on-site consumption facilities; and how cannabis use is limited in public spaces. Chair Adibe thanked the work of the Workgroup and staff, discussed the Adult-Use Cannabis Advisory Panel, and gave closing remarks. Chair Jung thanked the Workgroup.

6. Reports

Chair Jung directed Council staff to review the reports submitted ahead of the meeting.

7. Closed Session

Chair Deb Jung moved that the meeting be closed in accordance with Section 3-305(b)(1) of the General Provisions Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland to discuss a personnel matter, the topic was appointment of one or more specific employees. Council Member Liz Walsh seconded the motion.

The roll call vote called by the Administrator on the motion was: Yea: Council Members Christiana Rigby, Deb Jung, Liz Walsh, and David Yungmann. Council Members Opel Jones was absent. The motion to close the meeting in accordance with Section 3-305(b)(1) of the General Provisions Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland passed.

The Chair adjourned the Monthly Meeting at 1:33 p.m. to convene the Closed Session. Council moved from the Banneker Room to the C. V. Grey Room to meet in closed session.

The Chairperson convened the closed session at **1:35 p.m.** in the C. Vernon Grey Room.

Council Members discussed appointment of an Acting Auditor. Actions taken by the Council was to appoint an acting employee.

The Chairperson announced that the closed session ended at **1:39 p.m.**

The Council did not return to an open session.

8. Administrative Meeting

Following the open Monthly Meeting and Closed Session, the Council met for an administrative meeting at 1:40 p.m. in the C. Vernon Grey Room to finalize the job posting for the vacant Auditor position.

Members Present: Chair Deb Jung; Vice-Chair Liz Walsh; Christiana Rigby; and David Yungmann.

Staff Present: Michelle Harrod, Council Administrator.

Administration Present: Anju Bennett, Human Resources Administrator; and Tae Oh, Class and Compensation Manager.

Chair Jung closed the administrative meeting at 2:25 p.m.

Legislative Monthly Meeting - Participants
Tuesday, March 12, 2024

Comptroller

Brooke Lierman

HC Hospital

Dr. Mohammed Shafeeq Ahmed
Leslie Boyd Weber
Jackie Claxton

Bond Rating

Rafiu Ighile – Finance
Holly Sun – Budget

Spending Affordability

Holly Sun – Budget
Owen Clark
Todd Arterburn
Dr. Clinch
Ellen Giles
JC Hendrickson
Steve Hunt
Barbara Lawson

Cannabis Workgroup

Stephanie Adibe
J. Guzzone
Melanie Bishop
Dr. Roe Bonaccorsy
Chief Tavon Claggett
Jim Daly
Joe Dymek
Lynda Eisenberg
Chris Maynard
Amanda Mihill
Paul Rivers
Dr. Maura Rossman
Ciarra Roulhac
Katherine Yi
Roslyn Zinner