

Budget

As required by the Maryland Constitution, the General Assembly passed a balanced budget, **Senate Bill 360**. The Governor introduced and the Senate advanced an operating budget proposal that would have given Marylanders a balanced budget without tax increases. I strongly supported these efforts. However, the House of Delegates passed their version of the budget with substantial tax hikes added to **Senate Bill 362**, the Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act (BRFA), a bill that is passed with the budget for the purpose of enacting any changes to State law required to balance it. Following negotiations between the two chambers, a compromise was reached that took out about \$1 billion in tax and fee increases proposed by the House but which did include provisions to raise more revenue for the State.

I was concerned principally by two provisions of the BRFA. One enacts another increase on the State's tobacco tax. I have spoken before about how tobacco tax increases harm our economy by pushing Marylanders to purchase cigarettes from out-of-state businesses and jeopardize public safety by encouraging more purchases on the black market, which funds illicit criminal activity.

The second proposal was to substantially increase vehicle registration fees to fill the funding gap in our State's Transportation Trust Fund. I understand the need to ensure that we have the resources to build and maintain our roads and bridges. However, the State is once again expecting drivers to bear the full responsibility for balancing our Transportation Trust Fund without asking anything more of users of mass transit, which is contributing substantially to the deficit in the Trust Fund each year.

The additional revenues generated by the BRFA were not necessary to balance this year's operating budget. For that reason, I voted against the BRFA.

Public Safety

Public safety remains the top issue facing our State. **House Bill 814** makes changes to Maryland's juvenile justice system. This bill holds juveniles accountable if they illegally possess guns or commit third-degree sexual offenses or aggravated cruelty to animals. In addition, juveniles under the age of 13 who commit theft of a motor vehicle will receive a mandatory Child in Need of Services petition.

Importantly, this legislation also bans juveniles who are on the sex offender registry from entering school property or childcare facilities. This is similar to legislation which I co-sponsored this session to protect our children at school.

Senate Bill 1098 prohibits an individual convicted of first-degree rape that occurred on or after October 1, 2024 from earning diminution credits to reduce their prison sentences.

While these bills are encouraging steps in the right direction, there is still much more that needs to be done to make Maryland a safe place to live and work. I will continue advocating to improve public safety in our State in Annapolis.

Guns

House Bill 947 will allow state and local governments to sue what the bill terms as “firearm industry members” when firearms are used to commit crimes. This is yet another attempt by the State of Maryland to infringe on our Second Amendment rights by allowing our courts to be used for nuisance lawsuits against those who manufacture and sell firearms. I voted against this unconstitutional legislation.

Senate Bill 784 would have instituted an additional 11% tax on all firearms, firearm accessories, and ammunition sold in Maryland. I voted against this bill and strongly opposed this legislation when it was considered in my committee. I am happy to share with you that this bill failed.

Education

This session, the General Assembly continued to address the important issue of school safety. **House Bill 1390** repeals the sunset of the State’s School Safety Grant Program and includes language requiring the Interagency Commission on School Construction to report on the eligibility for school construction funding for artificial intelligence weapon detection systems – I support this initiative which is working in other states. **Senate Bill 1077** authorizes local school systems to use grants from the Safe Schools Fund for school safety employees.

Given the amount of funding allocated to our schools each year, how our State’s education funds are being spent continues to be a matter of importance. **Senate Bill 1026**, the Transparency in Education Spending Act, requires local school systems to post their presented and approved budgets as well as share any audit findings to the County Commissioners within a certain time frame.

Military and Veterans

The General Assembly once again passed a number of initiatives aimed at supporting service members, veterans, and their families in Maryland that I was proud to support. These include:

Senate Bill 55, authorizing the MVA to issue a special disabled veteran registration plate to an individual who is between 50% and 99% service-connected disabled.

Senate Bill 88, establishing the Maryland Commission on Veterans and Military Families to study and make recommendations for developing and implementing a statewide strategic plan to make Maryland the best state for veterans and military families.

Senate Bill 275, waiving special registration license plate fees for Gold Star Families.

Senate Bill 411, renaming the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs to be the Department of Veterans and Military Families and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to be the Secretary of Veterans and Military Families. The bill also requires the appointment of a Deputy Secretary of Military Family Policy and Programs.

Senate Bill 412, adding a person who has experience with mental health care for veterans or individuals serving in the military to the list of persons that can be appointed to a county mental health advisory committee.

Senate Bill 413, prohibiting discrimination based on an individual's military status with regard to housing and employment.

Senate Bill 477, the Time to Serve Act of 2024, increasing the amount of military leave available to state employees who serve in the National Guard or military reserve from 15 to 30 days.

Senate Bill 478, the Families Serve Act of 2024, authorizing employers to grant a hiring and promotion preference to the spouse of an eligible service member.

Senate Bill 533, authorizing the Department of Natural Resources to issue complementary lifetime hunting and fishing licenses to veterans who the federal Department of Veterans Affairs determines are "unemployable."