

Budget and Taxes

This session was overshadowed by the State's significant financial deficit, which was estimated to be approximately \$3 billion at the start of the year. I strongly believe that this deficit should have been resolved without raising taxes. As the Operating Budget was presented to the Senate, this deficit was closed through a combination of spending reductions, fund transfers, and tax increases. The Senate Republican Caucus proposed additional cuts to balance the budget without needing additional tax revenue. This proposal would have implemented a 5% cut to all agencies except K-12 education, public safety and hospitals, reduced funding for the Blueprint for education, enacted a hiring freeze, repealed state employee raises, and reduced spending on health care entitlements, including medical services for illegal immigrants. I strongly supported this plan, but this amendment was unsuccessful.

Instead, the State's operating budget, **House Bill 350**, passed requiring additional revenue to balance the budget. Therefore, the General Assembly also passed **House Bill 352**, the Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act (BRFA), which included the largest tax increase in Maryland's history of over \$1.6 billion. This includes higher income tax brackets for taxpayers earning more than \$500,000 and \$1 million, phases out itemized deductions for those earning over \$200,000, and establishes a 2% surcharge on capital gains for filers with income over \$350,000. This bill also increases the sports wagering tax from 15% to 20%, repeals the sales tax exemption for sales of precious metal coins or bullion over \$1,000, and increases the maximum county income tax rate from 3.2% to 3.3%. House Bill 352 also enacts a 3% sales tax on data and IT services, which will hurt this critical industry for District 29 and Maryland as a whole.

While this budget includes some policies that may lower taxes for some Marylanders, such as a higher standard deduction, much of the benefits from these policies will be canceled out by raising numerous vehicle fees, including doubling the cost of a certificate of title, accelerating registration fee increases, increasing the excise tax on vehicles, and imposing a \$5 fee on the purchase of each new tire.

These tax increases will not only take more money from already overburdened Maryland taxpayers, but also hurt Maryland's ability to reduce our dependence on Federal spending by growing our private sector. **I voted against these tax increases and, since they were required to balance the budget, I voted against the operating budget bill as well.**

Education

A major driver of the State's current fiscal condition is the rising cost of education attributable to the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, also known as Kirwan. The General Assembly passed **House Bill 504**, which made alterations to the Blueprint's funding formulas and other programs associated with its implementation. Even with the alterations made by this bill, the Blueprint remains a significant cause of Maryland's poor fiscal outlook. I remain concerned not only the cost to State and local taxpayers, but also about how the State is measuring student outcomes under this plan. I introduced an amendment to this bill to freeze these funding increases until a more reliable assessment for students could be developed to make sure that we are getting the results we expect from such a large investment of taxpayer funds – this amendment was rejected and **I voted against this legislation.**

I also heard from many of you this year who shared your concerns about **House Bill 161**. While this bill was significantly amended by the Senate, it still takes away a great deal of local control from our elected county school boards. The bill as passed states that the curriculum guides and courses of study adopted by county boards must align with State content standards adopted by the State Board of Education, and allows the State to take away funding for local school systems that do not comply. **I voted against this legislation.**

Energy

Another topic of significant discussion this year was the rising cost of energy in Maryland. These higher prices are driven, at least in part, by legislation from Annapolis, such as the Climate Solutions Now Act, the expansion of programs paid for with utility bill fees, the acceleration of renewable energy mandates, and limitations on energy choice for Marylanders – **all of which I voted against**. This year, the General Assembly passed a package of three bills relating to energy:

- **Senate Bill 909** - Energy Resource Adequacy and Planning Act
- **Senate Bill 931** - Public Utilities - Generating Stations - Generation and Siting (Renewable Energy Certainty Act)
- **Senate Bill 937** - Electricity and Gas - Emissions Reductions, Rate Regulation, Cost Recovery, Infrastructure, Planning, Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard, and Energy Assistance Programs (Next Generation Energy Act)

Some of these bills include policies that are steps in the right direction towards generating more reliable electricity in our State, particularly as it regards nuclear energy. However, other parts of these bills are very concerning, particularly for those of us in rural areas. **Most notably, Senate Bill 931 makes it easier for the State to override local control of the location of large solar projects, particularly on agricultural lands, something I opposed**. While these bills do include some relief, such as payments averaging about \$80 to ratepayers for one year, the General Assembly unfortunately did not take this opportunity to reverse the policies that caused this increase in energy prices nor provide more meaningful ongoing relief to Marylanders' electricity bills going forward.

Public Safety

House Bill 853, which gives convicted criminals the ability to file a motion to reduce the duration of their sentence if the individual was convicted between the ages of at least 18 and under 25 and they had served at least 20 years of their sentence, passed the General Assembly this session.

As the bill passed the House, there were two groups of offenders excluded from the bill – those who had been sentenced to life without parole and sex offenders. Senate Republicans introduced amendments to attempt to expand this list of those excluded. The first amendment, which would have excluded those convicted of murdering a victim under the age of 13, failed by a vote of 19-26. I then introduced an amendment to exclude those who murder first responders in the line of duty from filing a motion to reduce their sentence under the bill. Any crime that is eligible to be reviewed under this bill is disturbing, but those who would target and attack first responders in the line of duty pose an even greater threat to public safety. *This amendment was added to the bill by one vote, 24-23.*

While this amendment adds an important protection for first responders, I am still concerned for the families and loved ones of all victims of these crimes. Because this bill will result in the release of other violent criminals, **I continued to strongly oppose the Second Look Act and voted against its final passage**. However, this bill with this amendment was passed by both chambers prior to the end of the session.

House Bill 1222 continues the effort to interfere with the enforcement of immigration law in Maryland, this time at certain locations deemed to be “sensitive.” **I have consistently opposed this effort and voted against this bill**. While this legislation did pass, I am happy to share with you that provisions that would have required Maryland counties to end their cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement through the 287(g) program were removed by the Senate prior to the final passage of this bill.

Second Amendment Issues

I am happy to report that three bills that would have infringed on our right to keep and bear arms did not advance during this legislative session:

- House Bill 387, which would have imposed an 11% excise tax on retail firearm sales in Maryland, did not receive a vote in the House of Delegates prior to the end of session.
- House Bill 937, which would have doubled the sales and use tax for firearms, firearm accessories, and ammunition, was withdrawn from consideration in the House of Delegates.
- Senate Bill 634/House Bill 741, which would have gradually banned the use of lead ammunition while hunting, also did not receive a vote in either the House or the Senate before the end of the legislative session.

I strongly opposed all three of these bills and will continue to do so if they are re-introduced in the future.