

April 10, 2013

TO: THE PEOPLE OF LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT 8

THE 2013 GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION – A BUMPER CROP OF BIG BILLS

The 433rd session of the Maryland General Assembly was marked by its unusual fast pace and a bumper crop of big bills – some winners and some losers.

I was not in favor of the death penalty repeal. I agreed with Baltimore County State's Attorney, Scott Shellenberger, who said that capital punishment should be preserved as a sentencing option for the worst of the worst murderers.

I fought against passage of the gas tax increase. When fully implemented in three years, the per gallon gas tax will increase from 23.5 cents to 43.7 cents, an 86% increase. It will cost Marylanders \$19 a year, rising to as much as \$100 a year, and push the state from having the 29th highest gas tax in the nation to the 5th highest gas tax. Probably, the worst thing about the tax is that it is tied to inflation and will increase automatically as the cost of living increases. Unless the law is changed in the future, neither the General Assembly, nor the Governor, nor the people will be able to stop the gas tax from increasing. To me, it represents one of the worst things government can do – put tax increases on automatic and abdicate government's role in raising taxes or opposing tax increases.

In the win column, legislation was approved to expand voting opportunities for Maryland citizens. Early voting would be increased from 6 to 8 days and voting sites will be increased according to population. In addition, absentee voters would be able to receive a ballot by email. I opposed legislation that would have greatly increased the number of voter signatures needed to petition an approved bill to referendum. I oppose anything that diminishes the people's voice from being heard.

I count passage of the Governor's Offshore Wind Bill as a loser for residential and business electric customers. There is a reason that not one Atlantic coast offshore wind project has gotten off the ground. Either they can't find investors or, like Massachusetts, they can't find buyers for wind, the most expensive and least reliable clean fuel. The Governor said he will hold the cost of wind down to 19 cents per kilowatt hour. Even if he could hold the 23 cent to 26 cent cost of wind per kilowatt hour down to 19 cents – that's still much more than the 10 cents to 12 cents per kilowatt hour that most of us pay for electricity. I don't know why wind is called a clean fuel because it is so undependable that it has to have backup from a coal-fired plant that fills the air with carbon dioxide. Some people say the best thing about the bill is that the offshore wind project will probably never be built.

Talking on a cell phone while driving will now be a primary offense. That means a police officer can stop a motorist for just talking on the phone and does not have to observe another traffic violation to stop the driver. The maximum fine would be \$500 and no points would be assessed.

Legislation, which I opposed, was passed to allow the MVA to give Maryland driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. It's a fact that a driver's license is vital to living in the modern world. So, in essence, the State of Maryland will now make it easier for illegal immigrants to live here. To me, it looks like law-breaking pays. They break the law by living here illegally and the state rewards them with a valid Maryland driver's license. New licenses will be awarded to 100,000 illegals.

The Governor's gun control legislation was approved. I did not support the bill because I don't believe it will prevent gun deaths. While I certainly believe in keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people, I am pessimistic that this legislation will do it. I think the legislation is the first step in an assault on second amendment rights. The Governor included \$25 million in his budget to be used to enhance school security with features like automatically locking doors and shatterproof glass.

In the win column, the Veterans Full Employment Act of 2013 was approved. It helps recently-discharged veterans and their spouses find employment by putting the issuance of specified licenses, registrations, and certificates on the fast track. Further, it requires the state's Higher Education Commission to adopt guidelines on awarding academic credit for a student's military training, coursework, and education. This will translate the veteran's military experience into academic credits. Every state public institution of higher learning must adopt the guidelines.

Maryland Employment Right Now (EARN) was approved. The bill provides an avenue for targeted workforce training through the EARN Program, within the Department of Labor, Licensing & Regulation. The Department will receive \$2.5 million in state grants each year to provide industry-led partnerships. High demand occupations and needed skills in the state will be identified and the grant money will be used to train workers to meet those demands.

Efforts to clean up the disgraceful speed camera program failed. The rejected bill sharply clarified that it is unlawful to adopt a per-ticket program, whereby the vendor and the jurisdiction hiring the vendor make money from every speeding ticket. Unfortunately, the bill allows any per-ticket program already in existence to keep operating until 2016. And the approved bill does not require precise time stamps on citation photos, which is necessary for drivers to be able to verify their speed.

One of the most costly failures was the defeat of legislation to extend the effective date of the storm water management fees from July 1, 2013 to July 1, 2015. The fees are assessed on homes and businesses in the ten most populous jurisdictions, including Baltimore County. They are based on the square footage of impervious surfaces. Impervious surfaces, such as parking lots, driveways and roofs, are hard surfaces that deflect water, rather than absorbing it, causing the polluted water to flow into rivers and streams that feed into the Bay. Fees would be included in property tax or water bills. Government-owned buildings are exempted from the fees. The problem with the fees is that they are so expensive that businesses will be driven away and discouraged from locating in Maryland. For example, residents in Baltimore County will typically pay from \$18 to \$36 a year. However, an apartment complex with 127,680 square feet of impervious surface on a 5-acre lot would pay a \$4,405 fee. One owner of a transfer terminal argued that his stormwater fee will be about \$44,000, while his property taxes were \$58,000.

If you would like to receive a more comprehensive breakdown of these issues, as well as information on other issues discussed during the 2013 session, please feel free to call or email me and I would be happy to mail that information to you. As always, I encourage and welcome your input.