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Legislative District 24
Prince George's County

Finance Committee
Chair, Rules Committee

Joint Committees

Children, Youth, and Families
Ending Homelessness
Fair Practices and State Personnel Oversight
Management of Public Funds

Chair, Prince George's County
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

April 18, 2019

Dear Faithful Constituent,

On Monday, April 8th at midnight the Maryland General Assembly adjourned and concluded the 2019 Legislative Session. This session was truly a whirlwind. With a number of new Senators elected, new committee assignments, and some pressing issues at hand, we truly had our work cut out for us. However, not only did we persevere, but **we prevailed**. This session our office alone had six critical pieces of legislation passed, currently pending the Governor's signature to become law. I would like to express my appreciation for your continuous support and input. My colleagues and I in Annapolis work tirelessly to pass legislation that will positively impact our district, our wonderful county, and the great State of Maryland. Below are several critical initiatives that we accomplished this year.

BUDGET

State Aid Overview

Prince George's County will receive \$1.5 billion in State aid in fiscal 2020, an increase of \$92.5 million over fiscal year 2019. Direct aid will total \$1.4 billion and retirement payments will total \$122.8 million. This funding is equivalent to the amount of revenue generated from a \$1.50 county property tax rate. Compared to other jurisdictions, Prince George's County receives a higher level of State support. On a per capita basis, Prince George's County ranks seventh with State aid totaling \$1,644 per resident. In comparison, per capita State aid totals \$1,326 statewide and \$978 in Montgomery County.

Prince George's County Public Schools

County public schools will receive \$1.2 billion in fiscal 2020, which represents a \$79.2 million increase from the prior year. Additional funding under existing education aid formulas will total \$25.6 million, which includes \$3.1 million from the tax increment financing grant. Additional funding under the Kirwan Commission's Blueprint for Maryland's Future will total \$53.6 million. State funding for teacher retirement payments will total \$115.2 million in fiscal 2020, a \$6.2 million increase from the prior year.

Other Aid Programs

The county library system will receive \$7.6 million for operations, while the Prince George's Community College will receive \$33.9 million. Police protection, fire, and rescue aid will total \$21.6 million, including \$4.9 million in targeted crime prevention grants. Local highway and other transportation grants for Prince George's County will total \$15.3 million, with municipalities receiving \$7.8 million of this funding. Gaming impact aid related to the MGM casino will total \$27.5 million, and disparity grant

funding will total \$36.2 million. Also, State aid for public health services in the county will total \$6.7 million.

SENATOR BENSON'S BILLS

Senate Bill 299 Tanning Devices- Use by Minors Prohibition: The use of tanning beds before the age of 35 increases the risk of acquiring melanoma by nearly 60%. This bill will help reduce the risk of Maryland's youth of acquiring cancer.

Senate Bill 300 Prevailing Wage Rates-Public Work Contracts- Suits by Employees: This bill will authorize an employee under a public work contract who is paid less than the appropriate prevailing wage to sue to recover the difference in wages paid without initially filing a complaint with the Commissioner of Labor and Industry.

Senate Bill 301 Hospitals- Patient's Bill of Rights: To ensure that the quality of care is the same for every hospital in the State of Maryland SB 301 requires that Maryland healthcare providers supply patients with a uniform list of their rights. This bill requires a uniform standard for hospitals and specifies the ethical and humane treatment that a patient has the right to expect.

Senate Bill 421 Video Lottery Terminals- Minority Business Participation Goals – Enforcement and Reporting: This bill would protect our minority owned and operated businesses by extending a certain termination date for certain provisions of law relation to minority participation in video lottery facility operations.

Senate Bill 422 State Department of Education- Employment Categories and Practices: This bill seeks to alter the employment categories of certain employees of the State Department of Education (MSDE,) as well as require that all positions in the Department be appointed positions in the professional service and skilled service. This legislation attempts to bring the MSDE in line with the rest of the state by requiring that employees who would typically be described as professional or skilled be so categorized at MSDE

Senate Bill 425 Home Energy Assistance- Critical Medical Needs Program: Initially created as a pilot program in 2015, this bill seeks to formalize the Critical Medical Needs Program (CMNP). This program seeks to provide expedited energy assistance to medically vulnerable households through reducing barriers to obtain assistance from energy and efficiency programs.

House Bill 188 (PG 409-19) Prince George's County- Property Tax Credits- Grocery Stores: This bill would authorize the governing body of Prince George's County to grant by law, a property tax credit against the personal property tax imposed on personal property of a grocery store that completes certain construction and is located within a healthy food priority area.

OTHER IMPORTANT BILLS

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Kirwan Commission)

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future (also known as the Kirwan Commission) is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to modernize our outdated school funding formulas. While the Blueprint will not be cheap to implement, every piece of the Blueprint that can be implemented will take monumental steps forward for our state's education system. This year, the General Assembly spent \$255 million to fund the initial recommendations of the Kirwan Commission. This funding includes:

- \$75.0 million for teacher salaries
- \$65.5 million for special education grants
- \$54.6 million for low-income jurisdictions

- \$31.7 million for pre-kindergarten programs
- \$23.0 million for tutoring services
- \$2.50 million for teacher training
- \$2.00 million for more guidance counselors

In addition, the Legislature passed the companion legislation (SB 1030), which not only set out many of the programmatic elements recommended by the Commission, but also mandated \$355M in funding on the Blueprint in FY21, as well as \$500M in FY22, with \$130M of that funding contingent on additional revenue legislation passed by the General Assembly in 2019 or 2020.

Giving Working and Middle Class Families A Raise

Too many Maryland workers put in an honest day's work but cannot provide for themselves and their families. The Maryland General Assembly recognized this need and passed SB 280 to increase Maryland's minimum wage for all employers to \$15/hour by 2025. The Senate was concerned about the impact the minimum wage increase would have on small business throughout Maryland and included language giving small businesses with less than 15 employees an additional year and a half to reach the \$15/hour threshold. The bill also included increased funding for Maryland's Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) and other care providers to ensure they can pay their employees above the minimum wage for their important work in our communities.

Keeping Tobacco Out of the Hands of Children

While the number of people who smoke has been declining, the introduction of vaping products such as Juul and other electronic nicotine delivery systems have caused more children to start. SB 895/HB 1169 raises the age to buy tobacco products like cigars, cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and vaping products to 21. It also increases the penalty that those who sell tobacco products to minors must pay. The bill also allows for the Maryland Department of Health to make unannounced inspections to establishments that sell tobacco products to ensure they are complying with the law.

Keeping Prescription Drugs Affordable

The cost of prescription drugs have been going up year after year, making it harder and harder for people to afford life-saving medications due to these skyrocketing costs. In the richest State and in the richest country in the world, no one should die because they can't afford their prescription prices. HB 768/SB 759 created the Prescription Drug Affordability Board to review the cost of prescription drugs and increases in their prices, as well as look at the best ways to bring down the cost of prescription drugs including bulk purchasing, upper payment limits, reverse auctions, and more. This board will have the power to recommend upper payment limits on the price of prescription drugs to help keep the costs of these medications at a level where the people who need them the most can afford them, though they will need approval before they can move forward with implementation of Upper Payment Limits for State government.

Protecting Federal Workers During Government Shutdowns

During the latest federal government shutdown, many federal employees in Maryland had to worry about how they would pay their bills. SB 512 would prohibit utility companies from cutting off gas or electric service to furloughed workers during a government shutdown, as well as prohibiting a bank from foreclosing on furloughed employees. SB 391 allows federal workers who are required to report to work, but are not being paid, during a government shutdown to qualify for unemployment insurance or to receive no-interest loans. Once the government reopens and the employee receives back-pay they simply repay the unemployment benefits or the loans.

Protecting Maryland's Environment for Future Generations

The health of Maryland's environment and the health of Maryland's economy are closely intertwined. The looming threat of climate change is a threat that we must all take seriously. Maryland currently requires that 25% of the energy used in our state must come from renewable sources by 2020. The Clean Energy

Jobs Act, SB 516, will raise that threshold to 50% by 2030, with a top projected rate increase of just \$1.50 a month per household. In addition, it will also create approximately 20,000 new quality jobs in the clean energy sector through 2029. Wages for these jobs are family sustaining and offer Marylanders new opportunities in this growing field.

Protecting Prescription Drug Benefits for State Retirees

In 2011, facing a massive pension liability crisis, Maryland made the decision to move retirees to Medicare Part D by the end of the decade to remove a \$10 Billion liability from the state. Hearing the concerns of the retirees, the General Assembly took bipartisan action to address the issue. SB 946 will help protect retired state employees from the high cost of prescription drugs. The bill establishes a new prescription drug plan that caps yearly out of pocket costs at \$1500 for an individual and \$2000 for a family. Our state employees worked hard and retired with the expectation that their prescription drug costs would be covered. SB 946 keeps that promise to the people who helped make our state run every day, without a \$10 billion liability to the state.

Lowering Property Taxes for Maryland's Seniors

Currently, senior citizens in Maryland can qualify for a property tax credit if they are at least 65 years old and have lived in the same residence for 40 years. This severely restricts the number of eligible seniors. SB 654 removes the 40 year requirement and allows local jurisdictions to set their own length of time that a senior has to live in their home in order to qualify for the property tax cut.

Protecting Insurance Coverage and Making it Easier to Enroll

Senate Bill 868 protects the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in Maryland by extending the Maryland Health Insurance Coverage Protection Commission for an additional three years through June 20, 2023. The commission must establish a specified workgroup to monitor actions relating to the ACA and determine the most effective manner of ensuring that Maryland consumers can obtain and retain quality health insurance, independent of any action or inaction on the part of the federal government or any changes to federal law or its interpretation.

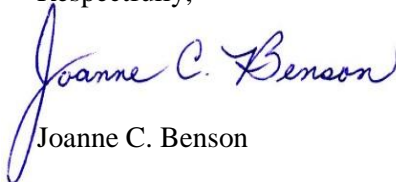
Reducing Child Care Costs

Childcare costs are a sizable, and often crippling, expense in most family budgets. SB 870 increases funding for the Maryland Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and benefits approximately 110,000 Marylanders who are currently struggling to pay for adequate child care. Currently the credit can only be claimed by those who make less than \$50,000 per year, this legislation expands the credit to those individuals who make more than \$50,000 but less than \$143,000.

CONCLUSION

I deeply value your unwavering support and friendship. My commitment to our children, senior citizens, veterans, the working people, the homeless, as well as the hopeless and the helpless remains firm. As we begin preparing for the 2020 Legislative Session, I encourage you to continue to reach out to me and my office and voice any concerns or issues that you may have. Please contact my office at (301) 858-3148 or by email at Joanne.Benson@senate.state.md.us. I look forward to hearing from you and continuing to represent the needs of the citizens of Prince George's County.

Respectfully,



Joanne C. Benson