

Minutes of the Fall 2020 PRA Meeting

The Fall meeting of the Parkwood Residents Association (PRA) was held via Zoom October 26, 2020, 7:30 – 8:30 p.m. Approximately, 40 persons were in attendance.

Kira Lueders, President, welcomed everyone, then thanked Jeff Griffith, Vice President and Newsletter Editor, who would lead the virtual meeting.

Jeff introduced the two speakers, Delegate Emily Shetty and Delegate Jared Solomon. Both were elected to the Maryland General Assembly in 2018. Delegate Al Carr was also in attendance.

Remarks by Delegate Emily Shetty

Del. Shetty thanked everyone for attending. She stated that the upcoming MD general session would be quite different from previous sessions. Most of the business will be handled virtually (as underscored by the presence of her 5-year-old son, just off-camera at today's Zoom meeting). Del. Shetty serves on the Judiciary Committee where her focus is constituent service. The pandemic, not surprisingly, has raised the level of constituent casework, both in number and type of cases. Unemployment and housing are major concerns. Del. Shetty and other committee members are responding to constituents' questions regarding their eligibility for services. Support structures for telemedicine was one of the bills passed by the committee in the last session. Del. Shetty highlighted this bill as a crucial link for patients and their health care providers during the pandemic. Councilmember Albornoz has been working with the state judiciary committee to spend federally appropriated dollars to shore up our stressed public health Infrastructure.

Del. Shetty explained that delegates serve on one General Assembly committee and one local committee. Her local committee has been focusing on bills and state laws that affect Montgomery County. Between now and the end of the year, they will be concentrating on the economy, Covid 19, housing and local elections. Providing access to the ballot for all eligible voters is a priority. Housing has become a more acute issue due to the pandemic. The Housing Opportunities Commission and the District Court have filed for an eviction moratorium.

The 2021 Maryland General Assembly opens in mid-January with a hybrid plan for conducting business. Hearings will be virtual; floor votes will be in person. Everything will be accelerated in the upcoming session: Hearings will be done earlier; bill hearings will be held on day two.

Among the issues before the House of Delegates Judiciary Committee in the 2021 session is police reform. The MD Senate has already held hearings and has conducted an independent investigation, focusing on the Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights, and use of force priorities as part of larger police reform. Del. Shetty provided historical background on this issue. The Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights dates back to the 1970's. It reflected the Baltimore experience at that time, but it has created a lack of transparency and accountability and is overdue for review and possibly full repeal. The Legislative Judiciary Committee voted for full repeal of what they consider is a flawed policy. They are determined to replace it with a policy that is fair and open.

Many of the critical issues before the House of Delegates in 2021 are due to Covid 19. Because the primary care infrastructure is under a high degree of stress, committees will focus on improving telehealth, stabilizing the public health infrastructure, and providing health care institutions with

needed equipment and supplies. Councilmember Gabe Albornoz has been working with the Maryland delegates on the local effort to secure a special federal appropriation of \$3 million to MC to shore up our public health infrastructure.

Del. Shetty expressed her belief that although the 2021 session has a full agenda and will look very different, in some ways it will be easier for constituents to follow the proceedings. The district she represents, which includes Parkwood, is one of the most active in the state. She expressed hope that accessible virtual sessions can lead to even more engagement. She is looking forward to a good deal of interaction with her constituents. She suggested that email messages are an effective means for constituents to make their views known to their representatives.

Remarks by MD Delegate Jared Solomon

Del. Solomon agreed with Del. Shetty that although next year's session will be logistically more difficult as they work through the process, it should be more accessible to the public as many sessions will be conducted on Zoom. His committee is working on much-needed improvements to their IT systems to allow for more citizen participation.

Del. Solomon serves on the House of Delegates Appropriations Committee which oversees the state budget as well as Maryland's higher education system and state personnel.

He has been appointed Vice-Chair of the Education and Economic Development Committee. He explained that his work on this committee is at the intersection of K-12, child care, early learning and higher education budgets and also policy that impacts the Departments of Labor, Education, and Commerce. He believes the committee's work is an example of the interplay of a strong education system with a strong economy.

The Montgomery County delegation has been working collectively as a full team with Del. Al Carr and collaboratively with Sen. Jeff Waldstreicher dealing with the effects of the pandemic: providing unemployment insurance, ensuring Covid testing capability, providing food distribution and other constituent services.

Del. Solomon gave a brief overview of the state budget which is the focus of the Appropriations Committee: The fiscal situation has been tough in 2020. The pandemic has thrown the budget for a loop, but by being financially responsible, Maryland ended past fiscal year with \$500 million surplus added to a Rainy Day Fund of over a billion dollars.

Del. Solomon stated that he expects fiscal years 2021 and 2022 to show improvement. That forecast is dependent on the state being able to handle the pandemic, continued federal support and a vaccine sometime next year. (A fiscal hole is also possible.)

He said that because of demands on the 2020 budget, they have not been able to put money in new places as they work really hard to make sure there's adequate funding for education and the environment, so that they are not going backward. He believes strongly that improving education and protecting the environment are critical.

Del. Solomon spoke of the importance of Statewide Ballot Question I, which would change the state budget process. He explained: Now almost all power resides with the Governor. Currently the state delegation works together in a bipartisan way to make decisions regarding budget items, for example, increased money for education or for rape testing kits. Often none of this happens, however, because the Governor allows all the money to go back into a general fund. Question 1 would rebalance the power between the legislative branch and the governor. The Governor would set spending limits, but legislators could use their authority to determine budget priorities. The Governor would still have veto power.

Del. Solomon believes that two education funding bills that passed out of his committee were really important. The first was for school construction. It would have provided \$400 million in federal money and \$400 million in new state money for school construction in Montgomery County. The governor did not veto this, but he allowed it to be put in limbo.

The Governor vetoed a bill for investments recommended by the Kirwan Commission Bridge to Excellence, which put forth a plan to uphold the quality of Maryland Schools by ensuring that underprivileged students get the support they need, mental health support is available, and all students are college and career ready at graduation.

The Governor also vetoed the Kirwan Commissions' recommended funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). And he vetoed several commonsense revenue bills that would have brought our taxes up to 21st century standards.

The appropriations committee has also been engaged in the proposed I-495 and I-270 expansion. Del. Solomon said that they have been vigorously fighting this expansion, working together with legislators from Montgomery, Prince Georges and Frederick Counties. He expressed appreciation for the local support and the great organizing by Citizens Against Beltway Expansion (CABE). With that support they've been able to scale back the original plan for Beltway expansion (which originally added lanes to the entire I-495) and get it to a place where it's a little more manageable. "It's still terrible, but not as bad as it was."

Seventy MD senators and delegates, including all of the MC delegations have sent a letter to MDOT expressing their strong opposition to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement of the I-495 and I-270 Managed Lanes Study. (Jeff noted that a link to this letter is in the PRA Fall Newsletter.)

Regarding the proposed Purple Line, Del. Solomon said he has been working with the planning commission to deal with some of the disruptions that ensued when the contractor quit the Purple Line construction. He does not believe that the "deep freeze" is the way to go. They will continue pushing it through to completion in spite of pitfalls.

Del. Solomon listed of some of his priorities for the 2021 General Assembly.

- Bring back the Schools' Clean Energy Bill
- Pass a new bill enabling our state university system to go carbon neutral
- Pass a clean drinking water bill to reduce the level of lead in drinking water
- Enable MARC to provide run-through service to Virginia, Baltimore and (later) connect with Delaware (vetoed by the Governor, but it will be brought back).
- Provide support for The Universities at Shady Grove and community colleges.

Del. Solomon is also working with other legislators on supportive actions for the childcare community, which is going through a rough patch during the pandemic. He wants to expand access to childcare and give existing childcare centers the support they need. Parents should have a high quality place for their children when they return to work. “We like to say that Child Care is the workforce behind the workforce.”

Questions from Zoom Participants

- What is the possibility of a beverage bottle deposit bill?

Del. Solomon said they’ve been working with Del. Love of District 16, but he doesn’t know the current status of the legislation. (Jeff mentioned Bailey Condrey’s concern that a bottle deposit bill could undermine the county’s recycling plan by pulling a valuable material out of the recycling stream.)

- What is likelihood that the Housing Opportunities Commission building will be repurposed for a community use such as an early learning center?

Del. Solomon: Nothing further has been decided. The Capital Budget has money set aside for community projects. We were able to get \$100,000 for A Wider Circle, Round House, and a trail for people with disabilities. The County has to put up a match for funding, which means that you should advocate with your county leaders. State will put in the money, but the county will make the decision.

Del. Al Carr added: We have a great team engaged on the HOC Property. HOC is getting a new headquarters in downtown Silver Spring. The school system has the first rights to refuse, as the site is a closed school. MCPS may want it for a use that would be compatible with local wishes. The local delegation will stay engaged on the issue.

- What is likelihood that a Death with Dignity bill will pass in the upcoming session?

Del. Shetty: During the last session, the deliberations were pretty contentious although the full Montgomery County delegation supported the bill. When it was brought up in the Senate, one member refused to vote, causing the bill to fail. It’s possible that it would be different next year if members’ personal health experiences affect their positions

- What is status of purple line?

Del. Solomon: We’re doing what we can. The delay seriously hurts businesses in Silver Spring. We passed a bill to offset their lost revenue. Residential communities in Bethesda/Chevy Chase and Woodside/Lyttonsville have also been affected. We’re working with MDOT on this. The Governor contributed to the delay but now he’s been quiet. MTA has made a commitment to us that they would renegotiate contracts with subcontractors. The state has to renegotiate every sub-contract—sidewalks, bridges, blasting tunnels, landscaping etc. It will be tough, but we are committed to see it through.

-Additional comments:

Barb Coufal, representing Citizens Against Beltway Expansion (CABE), expressed thanks to Delegates Emily Shetty, Jared Solomon, and Al Carr and Sen. Jeff Waldstreicher for the letter that they signed with other senators and delegates expressing concern with the Draft Environmental Impact Statement of

I-495 and I-270 that pointed out many deficiencies in the draft. She suggested that citizens may want to send their own letters to MDOT.

Closing Remarks

Kira Lueders thanked the speakers and attendees. She also thanked Del. Carr for all of his help on local issues such as new construction in the Town of Kensington.

The Zoom meeting ended at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Judith Dighe, PRA Secretary