



ROBERT G. CASSILLY

Harford County Executive

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 2, 2024

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Harford Executive Vetoes Tax & Spend Charter Amendment

BEL AIR, Md., (July 2, 2024) – Harford Executive Bob Cassilly today vetoed Bill 24-016 because it will inevitably lead to higher taxes by expanding the spending powers of the County Council.

Currently the council has a limited role in developing the budget, the same role as in all except two of Maryland's major counties. This bill would instead align Harford with those two outliers, the suburban D.C. counties of Montgomery and Prince George's, which allow the council to increase spending toward favored budget line items.

Joining County Executive Cassilly in opposing Bill 24-016 were council members Guthrie, Giangiordano, and Reilly.

Council President Vincenti and council members Penman, Boyle-Tsottles and Bennett voted to approve the bill.

The county executive's veto message is attached.

ROBERT G. CASSILLY
Harford County Executive



ROBERT S. MCCORD
Director of Administration

EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

TO: Patrick S. Vincenti, Harford County Council President
Members of the Harford County Council

FROM: Robert G. Cassilly, Harford County Executive

DATE: July 2, 2024

RE: **Bill 24-016 – Amendment Article V Budget and Finance Section 512**

I am vetoing Bill 24-016, as amended, pursuant to Section 311 of the Harford County Charter (the "Charter").

I have carefully considered the serious implications of the charter amendment proposed by Bill 24-016 and put forth the following concerns.

Higher taxes will follow

As it has for the past 50 years, the Harford County Charter requires the county executive to submit a balanced budget for the coming fiscal year. The County Council's current role in our well-ordered system of government is to act as a check on spending. To achieve that purpose, the council has the authority to cut but not to increase budget line items.

This system has worked well for Harford's citizens and taxpayers in effectively limiting the size of government, controlling spending and taxes, and protecting the county's AAA bond rating.

By contrast, the charter amendment proposed by Bill 24-016 would allow the council to increase line-item funding toward any of the 5,000+ line items in the budget. In two other Maryland counties where the legislative branch has this authority, the result has been increased spending and higher taxes.

Proponents have said that Bill 24-016 cannot lead to higher taxes because the bill also requires a balanced budget, but this is highly misleading. The county executive alone must ensure funding is available to cover essential services such as ambulances, 9-1-1, roads, etc. If the council takes funding away from any of these services to pay for politically favored projects, the county executive will eventually be forced to raise taxes to cover our citizens' essential services. This is precisely the experience in the only two Maryland counties that have already adopted the changes proposed in Bill 24-016. To pretend this will not also happen in Harford is to deny the obvious.

More power goes to special interests

Under the current system, council members routinely make requests to the county executive for budget increases to various line items. The county executive is then responsible for considering the overall budget impact of each requested increase and whether such a spending increase will eventually force a tax increase.

By contrast, Bill 24-016 empowers special interest lobbyists, over citizens and taxpayers, to advocate in the county council for increased spending on their favored causes. Average voters do not have lobbyists to protect them against runaway spending and higher taxes. But the current council, for the first time in our history, includes two council members who are employed outside by entities (Board of Education and Sheriff's Office) funded by county taxpayers and these members routinely advocate and vote for increased funding for their employers. These council members pushed Bill 24-016's charter amendment through the council, despite their conflicting, dual obligations to their employers and Harford's citizens. Moreover, once their employers have more power to determine the budget, which is the true objective of Bill 24-016, these outside entities will act to ensure that future councils have even more of these employee/lobbyist/council members, overwhelming the voice of average citizens and taxpayers.

Guarding against unsustainable spending

The two major outside entities that state law requires to be funded by county government are the public school system (more than 41% of the county's general fund tax dollars) and the sheriff's office (more than 16%). These entities need and deserve funding, but unlike the county government, they are not accountable to taxpayers for their spending and, therefore, lack sufficient incentives to control spending. For example, for FY 2025 budget where most of county government was flat funded, these two outside entities requested funding increases of 13% and 19%, respectively. They made these requests despite knowing the county revenue was expected to be flat and that their proposed increases would necessarily require tax increases. With the proposed charter amendment, the county executive's ability to check such unsustainable spending increases and hold the line on taxes would be severely impeded or even eliminated.

The respective roles of the executive and part-time legislators

The Harford County executive's budget is essential to achieving a unified vision for the county – a vision that is ratified by the majority of voters who elect the county executive and by the majority of council members who must approve the budget. That budget is prepared by the county executive's full-time professional budget staff and department directors who work throughout an entire year to carefully analyze needs and resources. They then develop a

Executive Memorandum

July 2, 2024

Re: Bill 24-016 – Amendment Article V Budget and Finance Section 512

Page 3 of 3

proposed budget that is in line with estimated revenue and provides for essential services throughout the county.

Council members, by contrast, are all part-time legislators who review and approve the budget over a one-month period. They cannot effectively balance county resources with the entire range of critical funding demands. This shows the wisdom of our county charter, which currently limits the council's role to budget oversight and not budget design.

Engaged citizens appreciate the wisdom of the current budget process developed by the charter's drafters a half century ago and they overwhelmingly oppose Bill 24-016; this is according to those council members who disclosed the phone and email feedback they received from constituents. In one district, the tally was 10 in favor and 250 opposed. Public testimony in support for the bill came mainly from employees of the state offices funded by county taxpayers (board of education, sheriff, and state's attorney), that stand to benefit but lack accountability to taxpayers for the excessive spending that would inevitably result from the bill.

I would like to thank councilmembers Guthrie, Giangiordano and Reilly for their wisdom and foresight in opposing this bill.

Fundamental misunderstanding

Several council members who voted to pass the bill, which, if the County Council overrides my veto, will place the issue on the ballot, stated that they were not casting votes on the merits of the proposed charter amendment but were acting merely to put the question to voters for voters to evaluate and decide upon the merits of the bill. These statements reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the County Council's role in the charter amendment process. Voters who see the proposed charter amendment on their ballot will rightly interpret the council's approval of the bill as the council's endorsement of the amendment. Voters will assume that council members were not simply "passing the buck" but that council members actually did their jobs and were recommending the amendment for voter approval. Moreover, past experience with county charter amendments shows that most voters are busy with their own lives and unlikely to delve into the complexities of a charter amendment's far-reaching effects, even when those effects include the potential opening of the floodgates for higher taxes in Harford County for years to come.


For the reasons stated above, I must **VETO Bill 24-016**, as amended.


Harford County Executive


Date

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