

Letter from the Editor – Hoping for an era of fiscal prudence

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Hollywood, MD - Tell me again why so many people are leaving Maryland because they can't afford to live here? It really makes no sense. Much of Maryland is in proximity to the federal government and its employees living in the counties adjoining DC make good salaries and are afforded good retirement benefits. All the ancillary businesses ought to be doing well, too. On the Eastern Shore you have Ocean City, which despite its drastic makeover nearly a half century ago, still remains a popular tourist destination—especially in the summer. Western Maryland is also raking in the tourism bucks. I know this for a fact because last year when the fracking issue was being kicked around in Annapolis, a few Western Marylanders fired off angry missives to me when I suggested—delicately—that drilling for natural gas might give the region's economy a boost. Deep Creek Lake, Antietam and other higher, cooler spots are aiding that region's economy. The Chesapeake Bay, although it's high maintenance, is beneficial to the entire state, too.

And yet, predictions of more state budget shortfalls were being forecast. To make the situation further vexing, consider this—there's state-sanctioned gambling everywhere! If people aren't scratching tickets and strategically (or superstitiously) playing numbers, they can play slot machines and table games at several state constitutionally mandated locations. And if you recall, the table games weren't part of the original plan. Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 was a record-breaking year for the Maryland Lottery and that same fiscal year yielded \$1,420,942,363 in gaming revenue! Over 31 percent of that reportedly went into the Maryland Education Trust Fund.

So why do Marylanders hear so much talk every January of possible tax increases? Why aren't jurisdictions getting their Highway User Fee revenues restored? Why aren't lawmakers working to ease—or even eliminate—the tax burden bore by retirees? Why isn't there enough state money to do a rebuild of the Governor Thomas Johnson Bridge? I'm sure there are other questions.

The problem it seems is that the legislature continues to have a spending problem and there has been no way, it seems, to effectively curb it.

This week, Governor Larry Hogan proposed his FY 2019 budget, which he stated, “responsibly holds the line on spending without raising taxes, cutting services or raiding special funds.” The governor declared his proposed budget, which totals \$17.7 billion, is “100 percent structurally balanced.” He warned citizens that “legislatively forced spending increases continue to be an issue causing spending to grow faster than revenues.” However, he expressed guarded optimism that Senate President Mike Miller and House Speaker Mike Busch might be supportive of the proposed budget. The state budget has been frequently characterized as “on auto pilot”—a phrase Hogan repeated Tuesday, Jan. 16 when unveiling details of his FY 2019 proposal. “You simply can't keep spending more than you're taking in,” he added.

There may be other proposals, plans, reforms and innovative ideas to come out of this session of the Maryland General Assembly. After all, 2018 is an election year and everybody—governor, lawmakers and other statewide elected officials—have their jobs up for grabs. There could be no greater achievement during this session however, than finding a way to lick Maryland's embarrassing spending problem. Let's lend a hand and help hold everyone's feet to the fire.

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