

Elected officials meet with Calvert farmers

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Miss Calvert County Farm Bureau 2019 Haley Moore leads the benediction at the organization's annual legislative dinner.

Prince Frederick, MD - A day before the new board of the Calvert County Commissioners held its first business meeting and two days before the beginning of the 90-day Maryland General Assembly session, local farmers met with local elected officials. The Monday evening, Jan. 7 Calvert County Farm Bureau Legislative Dinner was attended by three county commissioners—including two new members—and two state lawmakers. There were also several county government employees in attendance. The event was held at Mt. Olive United Methodist Church in Prince Frederick.

The free-form discussion following dinner covered local and state topics. This included the issue that Calvert Farm Bureau President Jason Leavitt referred to as "the elephant in the room"—the future of the county's agriculture land preservation program, specifically, the Purchase and Retire (PAR) component. "It's a complicated issue," Leavitt conceded. "There are multiple moving parts." Leavitt recalled watching the video of the Dec. 4 meeting of the county commissioners that included a work session on the PAR fund, which was conducted by Department of Planning and Zoning Director Mark Willis and rural planner Ron Marney. The work session ended with a majority of the commissioners—three of whom are no longer on the board—voting to table any decision on PAR until a later date. Then-Commissioners' President Evan Slaughenhaupt told the commissioners that a public hearing is required before the board could vote to stop the program. County Attorney John Norris also advised that previous contracts with landowners would need to be honored.

Participation in the PAR program has declined over the years. Commissioner Mike Hart indicated his problem with the program was having it subsidized by county taxpayers. Hart did not attend the Farm Bureau event. Former Calvert Department of Planning and Zoning Director Greg Bowen was also not in attendance, however a bureau member stood up and referenced a letter Bowen had written about PAR. In the letter, Bowen pointed out that PAR funds don't come from county property or income taxes but from state transfer tax income, funds from the tobacco settlement between tobacco companies and the states and a county recordation tax increase. In his missive, Bowen affirmed that PAR transactions benefit everyone in the county.

"There is money in the budget [for PAR] but the decision has not been made," said Commissioner Earl "Buddy" Hance [R-At large]. County Administrator Terry Shannon told bureau members there are plans to conduct a work session with the new board of commissioners to bring them up-to-date with PAR. Willis admitted "a lack of communication that day, but said with a new board of commissioners now in charge, a "retooling" of the presentation would be appropriate.

"The [Calvert County] Planning Commission is responsible for the Comprehensive Plan," said Mike Phipps, who, like Hance, once served as Maryland Farm Bureau president. Phipps, who served for several years on the planning commission before a majority of the previous board of commissioners voted to expel him due to misconduct allegations, reminded the audience that "right now, we don't have an agriculture representative on the planning commission." Hance also encouraged Farm Bureau members to consider applying for upcoming vacancies on that commission. "It's a new day, it's not like the old board," said Hance.

Another newly elected commissioner, Kelly McConkey [R-District 3], also spoke to the attendees. "I'm a guy who's here to listen," said McConkey, who added there was much misinformation written and spoken about him during the 2018 campaign, labeling him as "pro-development. "I own a farm here. I think this board will listen to you." Leavitt noted McConkey approached the local Farm Bureau chapter and was the first new commissioner to meet with the organization.

Commissioner Steve Weems [R-At large] is now serving his third term. In his brief remarks, he also promised the farmers better responsiveness from the new board and added a work session on Calvert's agriculture land preservation programs will definitely be scheduled.

On the state side, Delegate Jerry Clark [R-District 29C] pledged to aid local farmers in making sure health department regulations imposed on farm-related businesses were not overly onerous. Clark, who was appointed by Governor Larry Hogan to fill Tony O'Donnell's unexpired term and then elected to a full, four-year term, serves on the House of Delegates' Environment and Transportation Committee.

State Senator Jack Bailey [R-District 29], stated that there has been farmland in his family for many years. "It's important to remember where we came from," said Bailey. He reminded bureau members that Maryland's "K-Tag" program, which permits registered farm vehicles within a 25-mile radius of the owners' farms, will expire unless legislation is introduced this session to extend it.

A representative from the office of Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller [D-District 27] attended the event. Delegates Mark Fisher [R-District 27C] and Michael A. Jackson [D-District 27B] did not attend.

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