

# Maryland: A chance for progress



BY JAMIE RASKIN

Having wrestled the structural budget deficit to the ground in the special session last year, in 2008 the General Assembly can address a range of important issues that have been overshadowed by the state's long-simmering budget crisis. I am delighted to share with you my sense of our upcoming agenda.

A week does not pass for me in the Senate without my hearing from constituents in Silver Spring or Takoma Park about the difficulties of having a family and living under laws that discriminate against gay and lesbian Marylanders. It is hard enough in general to balance work and family, get the kids to

school, and make ends meet, but for many of our neighbors, the ordinary challenges of modern life are exacerbated by marriage discrimination.

The denial of the right to marry creates huge problems for proper health insurance coverage, medical decision-making, effective inheritance and property arrangements, and a host of other practical concerns, not to mention the simple lack of equal respect for people's relationships expressed every day by the unfairness of our laws.

Although Maryland's Court of Appeals last year rejected a lawsuit by gay and lesbian Marylanders seeking to marry, the time has come for the General Assembly to act. I am co-sponsoring the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act in the Senate and working with my District 20 colleagues on the House side—Delegates Sheila Hixson, Heather Mizeur and Tom Hucker—to pass the legislation. It will be a tough sell politically to many of our colleagues, but our delegation will be unified in pressing for sweeping changes in the law to treat all citizens equally. One thing that Governor O'Malley can do right now is extend domestic partner benefits to state employees, and I have urged him to do so.

Another critical issue will be to expand college opportunity and make tuition truly affordable for young people in our state going to the University of Maryland or other state institutions. Last year Governor O'Malley was able to impose a freeze on tuition after years of

dramatic increases under his predecessor. We need to arrive at a fair formula for tuition that puts college in reach for all young people who have the talent and will to go.

At the same time, we must ensure that the University system collects the funds it needs for building, development and first-class teaching and research, as well as decent pay for its faculty and staff. Having once chaired our Higher Education Labor Relations Board, I am sensitive to the fact that graduate students do not have the right to a union and will be working with them this year to see that their interests are respected by university officials.

At a time when the national government has abdicated leadership on economic policy and infrastructure issues, we will continue to pick up the slack. The Judicial Proceedings Committee, which I serve on, will take up the rising tide of mortgage foreclosures to crack down on abuses in mortgage lending and to ensure fair rules in the foreclosure process.

Similarly, having passed a major piece of small business health care legislation in the special session, we have a lot more work to do now with hundreds of thousands of Marylanders who have no primary care doctor and no health insurance. Our worsening traffic situation demands real progress on the Purple Line, smart investments in road construction and repair, and improvements in both traffic-signal timing and telework policy. And I will be working closely with our Delegates to promote the rights of renters in our County as tenants face spiraling rent increases and a wave of condo conversions.

Having passed the California Clean Cars legislation and other aggressive environmental measures last year, we will be working hard to

enforce them. I will also be pushing bottle bill legislation, which is something we obviously need given the flotsam and jetsam of bottle trash we find during Sligo Creek clean-ups and that we see littered on many of our major thoroughfares.

Finally, of course, we will be striving to improve the quality of K-12 public education throughout the state. In our continuing quest to get junk food out of schools and nutritious food in, I will be re-introducing the farm-to-school-cafeteria bill I cross-filed last session with my beloved late colleague Jane Lawton, who suffered a fatal heart attack in the fall.

Delegate Hixson has stepped forward on the House side to introduce the bill, which will create a preference for locally grown farm food for school lunches and raise nutritional and environmental consciousness by connecting public schools to local farmers. Having worked hard to secure the right of 17-year olds who will be 18 by November to vote in the February party primary elections, I will introduce a constitutional amendment to cement this right into Maryland law and a bill to provide for registration of 16-year olds so they are ready to vote when their time comes.

With change stirring across America, it makes me proud to represent a community that has been in the forefront of so much political change and policy innovation.

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