***State of State Report to the Town***

By Rande Davis

All State District 15 representatives attended the May 21 Poolesville town meeting to provide its annual end-of-session report to the commissioners.

The state delegation chairman Brian Feldman led off the report by presenting a recap of the results of the special session called by Governor Martin O’Malley. The special session followed the passing of a so-called Doomsday Budget by the general assembly at the end of the regular session. The doomsday moniker has been used to describe the proposed additional $512 billion in spending cuts targeted to balance the state’s budget (the general assembly is constitutionally mandated to balance its budget each year).

Among the proposed cuts in the budget from the regular session were: elimination of the Geographical Cost of Education (GCEI) grants ($128.8 million), reduction of educational funds provided to school districts by state formula ($70.9 million), reduction of agency operating expenses by eight percent ($50 million), reduction of funding to state public universities by ten percent ($38.5 million), reduction of funding to community colleges by ten percent ($19.9 million), reduction of grants to private colleges and universities by ten percent ($3.8 million), elimination of state employee Cost of Living Adjustments ($33.8 million), elimination of five hundred state jobs ($30 million), and reduction of funding to the library and state library network system ($5 million).

Emphasizing the success of Maryland K-12 education by pointing to its number one national ranking, Feldman expressed the goal to maintain that success as a reason why the legislature voted to increase taxes on the wealthiest fourteen percent of Marylanders (single persons making more than $100,000 or couples making more than $150,000). He pointed out that the remaining eighty-six percent of Marylanders will not have an increase in income taxes.

The delegation’s report also stated that the action in special session saved 1,300 teacher positions, limited university tuition increases to three percent instead of thirteen percent, avoided double-digit increases in tuition to community colleges, and saved 15,000 scholarships for Maryland students.

Delegate Feldman reported that Maryland saw 49,000 private sector jobs created within twelve months, and this is part of the reason why the state has a relatively low 6.6 percent unemployment rate (5.5 percent for Montgomery County) and is ranked eighth in the nation.

Feldman also discussed the proposed shifting of the cost of teacher pensions from the state to the counties. He expressed the state’s frustration in being responsible for pension costs while county school boards set teacher salaries without any state involvement.

The final decision changed from having the counties pay the pensions to having them share those costs with the state. The plan is to phase in the county contribution over a four-year period. The process will eventually result in the counties’ paying for one-third of the pension costs.

In her part of the presentation, Delegate Kathleen Dumais, after accentuating the difficulties of the legislative sessions, pointed to the non-budgetary accomplishments in Annapolis and, in particular, to a right-to-counsel bill that was passed through her role as vice chair of the Judiciary Committee.

The bill addresses the problem of accused misdemeanor violators who did not have the benefit of legal counsel and who have ended up in jail up to thirty days or more. Under this legislation, accused misdemeanor violators who face a potential penalty of ninety days in jail or less will instead receive citations and will be released until proper counsel has been obtained and their case properly adjudicated. Her legislation allows for exceptions to the citation process for certain egregious misdemeanors (most often of a sexual nature) so as to address public safety concerns.

Delegate Aruna Miller, in her first appearance at a town commissioners’ meeting, reported on other legislative accomplishments that came from the Ways and Means Committee on which she sits. First, she reported on legislation that changed the allowable age to drop out of high school from sixteen to eighteen. The objective of the bill is to reduce the number of the 9,500 students who drop out of Maryland high schools each year.

She also reported on a new family farm preservation act that reduces the tax burden on farm estates from sixteen percent to five percent.

She concluded her remarks by expressing her appreciation for a recent tour of Poolesville High School and expressed her concern for the “holes and cracks in walls, rooms without windows, students eating lunch by sitting in hallways,” but pointed to the limitations of a state delegate regarding such issues, observing that such concerns are the province of the county boards of education.

Senator Rob Garagiola, for his part, reiterated some of that which was presented by the delegates but added to the presentation by highlighting that the state government increase in revenue is smaller than the overall cuts, that there has been a net decrease in state employees, and that the reduction in retirement pensions and the special session resulted in real “belt-tightening.”

He expressed disappointment in state transportation funding but expressed the hope that expansions in gambling and table games would allow some of those funds to go to transportation infrastructure needs.

Senator Garagiola also spoke of the state’s leadership role in alternative energy, expressing particular support for solar and wind energy. He stated his expectation that within an eight-year period, solar energy could be equivalent to traditional energy and even be competitive with it. He expects alternative energy to have a positive effect on the cost of traditional energy sources by reducing overall demand for those sources of energy.

In responding to the concern of Commissioner Kuhlman over the town’s reduction in State Highway Transportation funds (the town previously received as much as $220,000 per year while it is currently projected to receive only $43,000), Senator Garagiola told Kuhlman that the state highway funds to municipalities cannot be increased as the state does not have enough money to meet its own transportation and highway needs. He added his opinion that an increase in the state’s gas tax will become necessary at some point.

Commissioner Klobukowski articulated that the state is not doing enough to cut costs, pointing out that the sacrifice and challenge in the private sector has resulted in unavoidable job loss and that state employees should not expect to be exempted from the pain of recessions and a poor economy.