

February 27, 2020

Testimony on HB 282
Prince George's County – Ethics – Limitations on Applicant Campaign Contributions PG 407-20
Ways and Means

Position: Unfavorable

Common Cause Maryland opposes HB 282, which would repeal restrictions on donations to the Prince George's County Executive by those currently applying for certain zoning approvals.

Under current law, those applying for certain zoning exemptions and approvals are disallowed from donating to the members of the County Council and the County Executive. Much like the restriction on General Assembly members taking donations during the legislative session, the current ban on zoning applicants giving during the process helps to reduce the influence, or the appearance thereof, of money on zoning decisions that should be made with the best interest of the community. While the County Executive's role in this process differs from the role of the Council, it is undeniable that the Executive holds significant power and influence in most processes of governance in the county, and is still able to exert influence on the zoning process.

Some county legislators have complained that the current ban as structured is overbroad or leaves the county at a disadvantage against legislators from other counties without such a restriction. However, at a time when Marylanders are more concerned than ever about the role of wealthy developers on local governments, the answer to these concerns is not to reduce ethical rules and further feed into those concerns of Maryland citizens. Instead, concerns of the breadth of the law should be more carefully dealt with. Concerns of disadvantages to Prince George's officials should be addressed by making the playing field even and implementing these same types of bans throughout every county.

It has not even been a decade since former Prince George's County Executive Jack Johnson was indicted for his corrupt entanglement with developers, and as the trial of former Sen. Nat Oaks from last year shows, our political culture must still be vigilant in ensuring the ethical behavior of our elected officials. HB 282 reduces ethical oversight and increases the avenues through which wealthy interests may influence elected officials and government action. For these reasons, we request the committee report unfavorably on HB 282.