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## Space Entrepreneur and Commencement Speaker Dr. Kam Ghaffarian Surprises Capitol Technology University Graduates With Generous "Gold Envelope" Gift

By PRESS OFFICER  
Capitol Technology University

LAUREL, Md. (May 4, 2026)—Capitol Technology University's graduating Class of 2026 went home with more than a diploma on Saturday, May 2. Entrepreneur, philanthropist, and Capitol Tech alumnus Dr. Kam Ghaffarian marked this year's Commencement ceremony with not only an inspiring address to the graduates, but by handing out gold envelopes with a \$1,500 cash gift inside to celebrate their academic success.

When Dr. Ghaffarian immigrated to the U.S. to pursue his

dreams, his uncle loaned him a few hundred dollars to help him accomplish his dreams. That seed funding helped launch his remarkable journey to success.

"I want every graduate to leave today knowing that someone believes in them and in their potential. I was lucky to have people who believed in me, and it made all the difference. This gift is a token of that belief," said Dr. Ghaffarian. "Today's graduates are stepping into a civiliza-

tion-scale moment, powered by technologies that are elevating everything we do and redefining what is possible. I hope this reminds them to think limitlessly, that they have the potential to create their own future, and to always pay it forward."

Dr. Ghaffarian is a two-time Capitol Tech alumnus, having earned his BS in Electronics Engineering Technology in 1983 and PhD in Technology in 2022. Specializing in aerospace, dis-

ruptive technologies, and strategic business leadership, Dr. Ghaffarian has launched multiple industry-leading firms, consistently pursuing his visionary passion to advance humanity and expand human knowledge. In 2026, he was named one of Forbes' Top 250 America's Greatest Innovators. Additionally, his company, Axion Space, was listed as one of TIME's 10 Most Influential New Frontiers Companies, and X-energy was recently publicly listed on the Nasdaq Global Select Market.

Dr. Ghaffarian is also passionate about philanthropy, creating the Limitless Space Insti-



Dr. Kam Ghaffarian posing with graduate.

COURTESY PHOTO

tute to promote STEM education and research in interstellar space exploration. In this spirit, and in recognition of Capitol Tech's next generation of pioneering STEM professionals, Dr. Ghaffarian expressed his desire to celebrate the 2026 Commencement with a special gift.

Through innovative degree

programs, expert faculty, and partnerships that connect students to real-world opportunities, Capitol Technology University creates graduates who are ready to tackle ambitious careers in cutting-edge fields. Capitol Tech

See SURPRISE Page A3

## The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission Selected as a Finalist for the 2026 National Gold Medal Award in Parks and Recreation Management

By PRESS OFFICER  
M-NCPPC

RIVERDALE, Md. (May 4, 2026)—The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) is selected as a finalist in the 2026 National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration (AAPRA) in partnership with the National Recreation and Park Association.

The Gold Medal is among the highest honors in the park and recreation industry, recognizing outstanding management and service. M-NCPPC, which includes the Department of Parks and Recreation, Prince George's County and Montgomery Parks, is a six-time gold medal recipient. The agency earned this prestigious award in 1973, 1977, 1983, 1984, 2003, and 2015, and was also named a finalist in 2023 and 2025.

"We're the destination for the nation,



COURTESY SPRING 2026 ISSUE: PERSPECTIVES NEWSLETTER FROM M-NCPPC CHAIRMAN DARRYL BARNES  
M-NCPPC Prince George's County leadership and staff celebrating the 2025 Gold Medal Finalist Plaque.

and being named a finalist is a testament to our world-class parks and recreation," said Darryl Barnes, chairman of M-NCPPC, Prince George's County Planning Board. "We take pride in delivering exceptional experiences for our residents and visitors

and set the standard for parks and recreation nationwide."

"This recognition highlights the dedica-

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## Q&A With Maryland Commerce Secretary Harry Coker Jr.

Coker said in addition to the Sphere, the State Is Working to Attract and Retain small and medium-sized businesses. Capital News Service talked with Coker about the Sphere, goals for the agency and the impact of federal layoffs.

By IRIT SKULNIK  
Capital News Service

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (May 5, 2026)—Maryland's Secretary of Commerce Harry Coker Jr. said Sphere Entertainment Co.'s decision to build a second U.S. location in Prince George's County shows that companies want to invest in the state.

Gov. Wes Moore announced in January that Sphere Entertainment will build a smaller version of its Las Vegas venue at the National Harbor. Coker said he expects the event space to open within the next four years and generate more than \$1 billion for the state.

"Just imagine when people are landing in Washington, D.C. if you will, they're going to see that Sphere sitting on the hilltop

in Prince George's County," Coker said. "That is big time."

Capital News Service talked with Coker about the Sphere, legislative wins and goals for the commerce agency. He also discussed key issues in Maryland, including the pros and cons of data centers and the impact of federal layoffs.

The interview with Coker has been shortened for brevity and clarity.

**Q: What were some of the wins coming out of Maryland's legislative session?**

A: Biggest wins, not just for Maryland businesses, but for our residents—no tax increases, which is a big plus. The budget was balanced and not on the back of businesses or our residents, so that was a huge win for us.

**Q: What were some of your priorities for the legislative session?**

A: Support for tourism and the arts. Too often, folks are fixated on big tech and large manufacturing companies, which are important, but tourism and the arts are very important to our economic growth and to our wellness.

**Q: How does the Department of Commerce balance supporting small businesses and attracting and retaining big companies?**

A: We know we need both. More Marylanders are employed by small and medium businesses than big companies. We want to retain them, but we also want to help them grow their market share.

**Q: What is the estimated timeline for (the Sphere) construction?**

A: I expect that within four years it should be open. Prince George's County is working with all of its partners to expedite permitting, zoning, processing and the like.

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## PGCPS Leads the Nation in Green Schools

With 31 renewals and 10 new awardees, the district expands its state and nation-leading Green Schools network to 164 certified schools

By PRESS OFFICER  
PGCPS

UPPER MARLBORO, Md. (May 5, 2026)—Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) continues to lead both Maryland and the nation in Green Schools, with 31 schools renewing their certification and 10 schools earning the designation for the first time. The district now boasts a record 164 certified Maryland Green Schools—the highest total of any district in Maryland, which itself has more Green Schools than any other state in the country.

While there is no single national designation or ranking system for Green Schools, Maryland's nationally recognized program—administered by the Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (MAEOE)—includes more participating schools than any other state. As the top district within that leading state program, PGCPS stands as the nation's leader in Green Schools participation.

"Prince George's County Public Schools' continued leadership as the #1 district in the nation for Maryland Green Schools reflects more than recognition—it reflects a long-standing commitment to action," said Interim Superintendent Dr. Shawn Joseph. "For years, we have led Maryland in environmental education, and today that leadership stands on a national stage. Through our Climate Change Action Plan, sustainability is not an add-on in PGCPS, it is embedded in the daily learning experience of our students. From classroom instruction to school-wide practices, we are ensuring that every student has the opportunity to learn in environ-

ments that model responsibility, resilience, and stewardship. This is how we prepare young people not only to understand the world they inherit, but to lead its transformation."

The William S. Schmidt Outdoor Education Center, home to the district's environmental education program, continues to lead this work by supporting schools and educators with year-round programming and sustainability initiatives.

"PGCPS stands out across Maryland for embedding sustainable practices into school culture," said James Roberson, Supervisor at the Schmidt Center. "Students and teachers go beyond learning about environmental challenges—they actively develop and implement solutions within their schools and communities. The Maryland Green School program provides a powerful framework to support this work."

**Schools Earning New Certification (10)**

Andrew Jackson Academy; Chesapeake Math and IT Academy South Elementary; Fort Foote Elementary; Glenarden Woods Elementary; Gwynn Park Middle; International High School at Langley Park; Online Campus; Overlook Spanish Immersion School; Sonia Sotomayor Middle; William Wirt Middle

**Schools Earning Recertification (25)**

- High Schools: International High School at Largo; North-western; Surrattsville
- K-8/Middle Schools: Benjamin Stoddert; Thurgood Marshall

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A State Program That Boosted Small Businesses Is Getting Booted

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# TOWNS *and* NEIGHBORS

## Brandywine-Aquasco by Audrey Johnson 301-922-5384

### MAY BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

Happy Birthday to Joan Falby, Joyce Isaac, Lincoln Lucas, Janet Smalling, Nana Acheampong Akwo, Abena Acheampong Van-ness, Andrea Johnson, Angela Williams, De'Andre Bowden, Theresa Joiner, Kolbi M. Dee, Agatha Nicol, Ihuoma Mbakwe, Alayah Bourne, Blair Stephens, Cameron Barron, Loki Lucas, Mia Kerrick, Carolyn Glee, Alysia Falby, Dacinth Dorsett, Karen Nauman who are Clinton United Methodist Church members celebrating birthdays in May.

### CLINTON UNITED METHODIST CHURCH VBS

Join Clinton United Methodist Church Vacation Bible School July 13–July 17, 2026, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. each day. Our Theme this year is Snowball Mountain Challenge: FIND YOUR STRENGTH IN GOD. Pre-K–5 Grades. 6th & 7th Graders will be helpers in the classrooms. Please register your child for VBS on the church's website. <http://cumcmd.org>. If you need a registration form or more information, please contact the church office: 301-868-1281 or Audrey Johnson, VBS Director at 301-922-5384, [ajohnson12906@yahoo.com](mailto:ajohnson12906@yahoo.com).

### BOWIE STATE REPRESENTED IN CELEBRATING HBCU EXHIBITION AT THE SMITHSONIAN

"At the Vanguard: Making and Saving History at HBCUs" is on view at the National Museum of African American History and Culture through July 19, highlighting the legacy and impact of historically Black colleges and universities nationwide. The exhibition features a video, "HBCUs Present and Future," alongside photos and artifacts that showcase longstanding traditions and illustrate how HBCUs cultivate excellence and achievement.

Elijah Taylor, a 2025 Bowie State University graduate with a Bachelor of Science in communications, appears in the video discussing his decision to attend an HBCU. Filmed on Bowie State's campus. Taylor shares his perspective as part of the four-minute video, contributing to the exhibition's broader narrative. The exhibition will travel nationwide this summer, with scheduled stops in Atlanta, Houston and Tallahassee, giving audiences across the country an opportunity to learn more about HBCUs.

### STAY UP TO DATE WITH BSU

HEY ALUMNI, is your information up to date? Calling all BSU alumni if you moved or changed your email or mailing address, please let us know. By keeping your information current, you will continue to receive BSU news and updates. Please update your contact information. For questions and support, send an email to the Advancement Services office. Follow us on all social media platforms. Facebook: @BSUOAE: Instagram: @BowieAlum, LinkedIn: Alumni Bowie State, Bowie State University YouTube.

### APPRECIATION AWARD

Nottingham Myers United Methodist Church in Upper Marlboro, Maryland (Small Church, Big Vision, Bigger God) with Deepest Gratitude to Kimberly Montgomery. "Well done, thy good and faithful servant!"—Matthew 25:23. In grateful appreci-

ation for your 15+ years of dedicated service to the Finance Ministry.

Through years of growth and change, your steadfast commitment and wisdom have guided our stewardship and strengthened our church family. On this day of April 26, 2026. Rev. Shemaiah Strickland, Pastor Nottingham Myers United Methodist Church Finance Committee.

### PIANO KEYS SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

Piano Keys present every Saturday Night Live from 8 p.m.–2 a.m. Finally, a place in the DMV where you and your friends can enjoy great food, amazing cocktails, and dance the night away. DJ Reddz keeps the party going all night! Hosted by Dickson. Free admission all night (Except when we have artist performances). Doors Open: 5 p.m.–2 a.m. FREE PARKING, Dress to impress, VIP Tables Available. Piano Keys Restaurant & Lounge. For more information (240) 816-2211. RSVP & VIP TABLE.

### MISCHA DORR-AMES OHHS SCHOLARSHIP 2026

"Mischa Dorr-Ames OHHS Scholarship 2026, our 14th year of recognizing seniors who embody the academic ideals of one football player in honor of Terry, at Oxon Hill High School. We honored the cherished memory of Mischa and Terry (#40) with love, gratitude with purpose. Eight exceptional seniors at Oxon Hill High School students each awarded a scholarship to support their next chapter."

"Koron Christian (Former BOES Scholar), Gabriella Gonzales, Hope Chamberlain, Maleek Thornhill #74 (Football Player), Brian Crumb, Kelsi Grays (Former BOES Scholar), Tyler Henry, Isaiah Nelson".

"The heartfelt essays and commendations from staff reflected the true clipper spirit, resilience, leadership, and drive. None of this would have been possible without the support of classmates, colleagues, family, and friends (especially Jennifer Dean.) A special thank you to the incredible team at Oxon Hill High School (Thank you, John) for continuing to uplift and nurture such inspiring scholars." "Alicia Cunningham Dorr's Mom's message to students "Pay it forward."

### FRIDAY SUMMER SOUNDS FEATURING MARDI GRAS KINGS BRASS BAND

Kick off your weekend with Summer Sounds at National Harbor! May 29, 2026, 5–7 p.m. Every Friday, enjoy live music on the Plaza Stage featuring performances by our own Bobby McKey's Dueling Piano Bar and a rotating lineup of local artists.

In honor of America 250, performances from Memorial Day through Labor Day will feature a variety of musical styles from across the country, celebrating the sounds and traditions that define American music. Enjoy lawn games, grab a snack, and soak up the sunset vibes along the waterfront. Buy your tickets now. ADDRESS: 150 National Plaza, National Harbor, Maryland.

## Around the County

### Council Members Blegay and Hunter Celebrate Sprouts Grocery Store Planned for Westphalia Town Center

Prince George's County Council Members Wala Blegay (At-Large) and Danielle Hunter (District 6), in partnership with County Executive Aisha Braveboy, are proud to announce plans for a long-awaited grocery store in Westphalia. Sprouts Farmers Market, one of the largest and fastest growing specialty retailers of fresh, natural and organic food in the United States, is poised to open a 23,000 square foot location in the Westphalia Town Center, anchoring the Upper Marlboro shopping center located in Councilmanic District 6, currently represented by Council Member Hunter and previously represented by Council Member Blegay.

"I have fought alongside the Westphalia community to ensure that the promises made to residents were kept," said Council Member Blegay. "Westphalia, like every community in Prince George's County, deserves access to quality retail. Sprouts Market represents the type of grocer the community demanded, and I am confident its arrival in Westphalia will attract more upscale retail, restaurants, and commercial investment to the community."

"Access to fresh, high-quality food is not just about convenience, it is about health, dignity, and opportunity," said Council Member Hunter. "The arrival of Sprouts Farmers Market in the Westphalia neighborhood represents an important investment in our families and in the future of District 6. When we talk about healthier families, we must also recognize that food is medicine. Families deserve access to nutritious options close to home, and this project moves us closer to building communities where wellness is within reach."

"This is an exciting investment in the future of Prince George's County," said County Executive Braveboy. "Our residents have made it clear they want more access to high-quality grocery and retail options in their own communities. The arrival of Sprouts Market helps meet that demand while creating jobs, expanding opportunity, and continuing the momentum we are building to elevate the county."

### CloseKnit Opens New Primary Care Clinic in Seat Pleasant to Expand Access to Community-Centered Healthcare

SEAT PLEASANT, Md. (May 7, 2026)—CloseKnit today celebrated the opening of its newest primary care clinic in Seat Pleasant with a community open house attended by local elected officials, community leaders, and residents. The new clinic is designed to expand access to high quality, relationship-based primary care in Prince George's County—an area that has long faced shortages of primary care providers.

Located at 6230 Central Avenue, Unit 6, Capital Heights, the Seat Pleasant clinic offers comprehensive primary care services focused on prevention, chronic condition management, and same- or next-day access, delivered through a consistent care team that knows each patient over time.

"Too many residents in Prince George's County have had to leave their community to access basic primary care," said Dr. Esan Simon, Chief Medical Officer of CloseKnit. "This community-centric clinic exists to change that reality—by providing dependable, accessible care that helps people stay healthy, manage chronic conditions, and avoid unnecessary emergency room visits."

Prince George's County continues to experience one of the highest primary care shortages in Maryland, with residents often facing long wait times and limited provider availability. CloseKnit's model is intentionally built to address these gaps by centering long-term relationships, preventive care, and coordinated support—all under one roof.

The open house program featured remarks from Prince George's County Executive Aisha N. Braveboy, along with community leaders and partners, who spoke to the importance of sustained healthcare investment and accessible care options within the community.

"Opening this clinic is about equity, access, and dignity in healthcare," said Dr. Simon. "Every community deserves the same standard of care—and we are proud to bring that to Seat Pleasant and the surrounding neighborhoods."

*CloseKnit is an advanced primary care organization delivering relationship-based healthcare through in person clinics and connected virtual services. CloseKnit focuses on prevention, chronic condition management, and continuity of care—ensuring patients receive the right care, at the right time, from providers who know them.*

### Council Member Blegay Introduces Legislation to Make Election Day a County Holiday

On Tuesday, May 5, 2026, Council Member Wala Blegay (At-Large) introduced CB-39-2026, a bill seeking to make the General Election a county holiday each year, meaning county employees will be given the day off work to vote. Primary or Special Elections would remain unaffected by the proposed legislation. Prince George's County saw a 66.35% voter turnout for the 2024 Presidential General Election, the second lowest in the state. 21% of registered voters in Prince George's County voted in person for that election. The goal of this legislative proposal is to make voting easier and more accessible for all county employees, boosting election participation.

"I want to ensure all Prince George's County employees have the opportunity to fulfill their constitutional right of voting," said Council Member Blegay. "Election Day is one of the most important days of the year in our country, serving as an opportunity for Americans to make their voices heard. This bill is about making sure all of our county employees have the opportunity to do just that through civic engagement."

## In and Around Morningside-Skyline

With Mary McHale, will return soon!

## Local Dental Practice to Provide Free Care to Families in Need on Sharing Smiles Day

By PRESS OFFICER  
Pine Dentistry & Braces

DISTRICT HEIGHTS, Md. (May 1, 2026)—Pine Dentistry & Braces is proud to invite children in need of dental care to Sharing Smiles Day on **May 31** at its 6471 Marlboro Pike office. This annual volunteer event, sponsored by Pine Dentistry & Braces and its parent company Benevis, will provide free dental care such as dental exams, limited emergency care, extractions and restorative care, with cleanings offered on a limited basis, to uninsured or underinsured children. Families are encouraged to register in advance at [www.SharingSmilesDay.com](http://www.SharingSmilesDay.com).

This year, Sharing Smiles Day coincides with National Smile Day, turning a day of celebration into a day of action. Pine Dentistry & Braces is opening its doors from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm, Sunday, May 31, to children up to age 18 who do not have Medicaid or other forms of dental insurance. Families interested in receiving care should register at <https://sharingsmilesday.com/>.

"The team and I are proud to join nearly 400 volunteers across the US who will be providing care on Sharing Smiles Day," Dr. Jane Whang, regional dental director, said. "There is nothing more rewarding than seeing someone walk out of our office pain-free and smiling, knowing that we've made a real difference for a family that might otherwise have nowhere else to turn."

Over the past decade, Sharing Smiles



Day has provided dental care at no cost to more than 3,800 patients across nearly a dozen states to help combat poor oral health in underserved communities, as well as educate families on healthy dental habits. In addition to the team at Pine Dentistry & Braces, more than 380 volunteers from Benevis and its family of brands across 10 states will participate in this year's event.

"Sharing Smiles Day is all about making sure everyone has access to a healthy smile, especially the nearly 70 million adults and close to eight million children who lack dental coverage in the US," Roderick Place, CEO of Benevis, said. "By opening our doors to provide care at no cost, we are working to remove the financial and social hurdles that often stand in the way of a family's health. Benevis and its family of brands are happy to help the team at Pine Dentistry & Braces provide the high-quality care that every family deserves."

Pine Dentistry & Braces is a proud member of Benevis' family of brands, and is part of a network of like-minded, community-

focused dental homes that prioritize patient health to make a national impact. Benevis' mission is to improve access to essential dental healthcare and create local "dental homes" for families with various forms of insurance, including Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

To learn more about Sharing Smiles Day, or to register for care, visit [www.SharingSmilesDay.com](http://www.SharingSmilesDay.com).

*Pine Dentistry & Braces is one of Maryland's leaders in Medicaid and affordable dental care for children and their families. Supported by Benevis' family of brands, Pine Dentistry & Braces and its doctors are committed to improving lives by providing high-quality dental care in a fun, compassionate environment. To learn more about Pine Dentistry & Braces, visit [www.pinedentistry.com](http://www.pinedentistry.com).*

*Benevis is a leading dental healthcare delivery organization for practices focused on delivering life-changing oral care and orthodontics to underserved communities. Through comprehensive care and operational services that expand access to dentistry, Benevis has a 20-year history of providing the highest quality care to approximately 5 million children and adults. Its network reaches more than 100 locally branded dental offices across the U.S. that deliver treatment through 1.3 million visits each year. Benevis also advocates for programs and legislation that ensure all families have access to the oral healthcare they need and deserve.*

Proudly Serving Prince George's County Since 1932

# COMMUNITY

## Surprise from A1

has positioned itself as a leader for Maryland graduate salaries amongst other in-state colleges. The institution will be celebrating its centennial in 2027.

University officials expressed enthusiasm for Dr. Ghaffarian's generous gesture, noting that it adds an extra layer of inspiration and delight to this meaningful milestone for the graduates.

"Graduations are a time of achievement, reflection, and great opportunity," said Dr. Bradford Sims, President of Capitol Technology University. "Dr. Ghaffarian's gift to our Class of 2026 is truly appreciated and will stand as a memorable and inspiring highlight of this milestone occasion."

*Capitol Technology University is a leading STEM university located in Laurel, MD near the vibrant DC metropolitan area. Ranked #1 in Maryland for graduate salaries at all degree levels, the university's mission is to educate individuals for successful professional careers in STEM research, engineering, management, and business by providing relevant learning experiences. Through industry-expert faculty, technical skills development, and innovative partnerships, Capitol Tech fosters career advancement opportunities for the evolving global community.*

## Finalist from A1

tion and commitment of the staff who serve our communities," said Artie Harris, vice chair of the M-NCPPC and chair of the Montgomery County Planning Board. "I'm continually inspired by their work and the unique talents and passion they bring to our organization. This honor is truly well deserved."

"Being named a finalist for the National Gold Medal Award reflects the dedication and passion of our staff, volunteers, and community partners. Together, they work to deliver exceptional parks and programs," said Miti Figueredo, director of Montgomery Parks. "This recognition underscores our commitment to bringing people together, fostering inclusive park experiences, promoting healthy and active lifestyles, and responsibly caring for our natural resources."

"This recognition reflects the essential programs and services provided by our staff, who work every day to deliver exceptional parks and recreation experiences to residents across Prince George's County," said Darius A. Stanton, director of the Department of Parks and Recreation in Prince George's County. "As a six-time gold medal recipient, we are number one in the nation, and it's an honor to be a finalist and elevate our community on the national stage."

M-NCPPC is competing for the Gold Medal in the Class I category of park systems with a population of more than 400,001. Other park and recreation agencies competing for the Class I Gold Medal include Baltimore City Recreation and Parks, Hillsborough County Parks and Recreation, and Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation.

Founded in 1965, the Gold Medal Awards program honors communities in the United States that demonstrate excellence in parks and recreation through long-range planning, resource management, volunteerism, environmental stewardship, program development, professional development, and agency recognition.

The Gold Medal recipient will be announced in September at the 2026 NRPA Annual Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

*The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) is a bi-county agency empowered by the State of Maryland in 1927 to acquire, develop, maintain, and administer a regional system of parks within Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, and to provide land use planning for the physical development of Prince George's and Montgomery Counties. In addition, the agency gained responsibility for the public recreation program in Prince George's County in 1970. The governing body of M-NCPPC consists of 10 members, five appointed by Montgomery County and five by Prince George's County. The commission coordinates and acts on matters of interest to both counties and meets at least once a month. The members of the commission from each county serve on separate county planning boards to facilitate, review, and administer the matters affecting their respective counties.*

## Green from A1

- Elementary Schools: Apple Grove; Carole Highlands; Chillum; Flintstone; Gaywood; Glassmanor; Greenbelt; James H. Harrison; Melwood; Northview; Oxon Hill; Perrywood; Samuel Chase; Suitland; Templeton; Tulip Grove; Woodmore; Yorktown
- Specialty Schools: C. Elizabeth Rieg Regional School; Imagine Foundations at Leeland PCS

## Schools Achieving Sustainable Status (6)

Schools must renew certification every four years to maintain Maryland Green School status. This year, three schools reached Sustainable Silver Status (maintaining certification for six consecutive application cycles) and three schools reached Sustainable Status (maintaining certification for at least four application cycles):

- Sustainable Silver: High Point High School (22 years)
- Sustainable Silver: John Hanson Montessori (22 years)
- Sustainable Silver: Scotchtown Hills Elementary School (21 years)
- Sustainable: Baden Elementary (14 years)
- Sustainable: Charles Herbert Flowers High School (14 years)
- Sustainable: Kenilworth Elementary (14 years)

Schools will be recognized at the MAEOE Annual Maryland Green Schools Youth Summit on Thursday, May 28, at Sandy Point State Park in Annapolis. The event includes award ceremonies, youth leadership activities, a green careers fair, and an environmental literacy showcase.

Sponsored by MAEOE, the Maryland Green Schools program is among the most rigorous environmental education initiatives in the nation. With 702 participating schools, the program emphasizes hands-on learning, environmental literacy, and sustainable practices through eight comprehensive criteria areas in a non-competitive application process.

*Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS), one of the nation's 20th largest school districts, has 201 schools and centers, more than 133,000 students and nearly 20,000 employees. The school system serves a diverse student population from urban, suburban and rural communities located in the Washington, DC suburbs. PGCPS is nationally recognized for college and career-readiness programs that provide students with unique learning opportunities, including dual enrollment and language immersion.*

## National Capital Radio and Television Museum to Honor Tony Perkins at 2026 Annual Gala

By PRESS OFFICER  
National Capital Radio and Television Museum

BOWIE, Md. (May 6, 2026)—The National Capital Radio and Television Museum (NCRTV) has announced that veteran broadcaster Tony Perkins will receive the Ed Walker Lifetime Achievement Award in Broadcasting at its Annual Gala on Saturday, October 3, 2026, from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. The event will be held at the Comfort Inn and Conference Center, located at 4500 Robert S. Crain Highway, Bowie, MD.

The Ed Walker Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes individuals whose careers demonstrate excellence, longevity, and a lasting contribution to radio and television broadcasting. Perkins' career spans more than 30 years in the Washington,

D.C., media market and national television.

Currently an anchor on NBC4's News4 Today, Perkins has held prominent roles at WTTG-TV, WUSA-TV, MAJIC 102.3, and ABC's Good Morning America. Over the course of his career, he has earned two Emmy Awards and has been a trusted and familiar presence for audiences across the region.

Tickets for the NCRTV Annual Gala go on sale **June 1, 2026**.

For ticket information or sponsorship opportunities, contact 301-390-1020 or email [info@ncrtv.org](mailto:info@ncrtv.org).

*The National Capital Radio and Television Museum preserves and promotes the history of electronic media through exhibitions, education, and public programs, honoring the innovators and professionals who shaped broadcasting locally and nationally.*



COURTESY PHOTOS

## Bowie NJROTC: Navy Ball 2026

By PRESS OFFICER  
Bowie High School NJROTC

On Friday, April 10, 2026, the Bowie High School NJROTC Battalion had its Annual Navy Ball. This year's event brought together cadets and staff from Bowie High School, Friendly High School, Northwestern High School, and Suitland High School. The ceremony was led by the Masters of Ceremony, C/SA Carelock and C/SA Duarte. The ceremony began with the arrival of the

guest of honor, who walked under the Sword Arch commanded by C/SA Ateawung and the singing of the National Anthem by C/PO3 Ladeinde. This moment marked the formal opening of the ceremony and set the tone for the evening. One highlight of the night was a speech delivered by the distinguished guest—Area 3 Manager Lieutenant Teresa Hicks, who spoke to the cadets about leadership and growth within the NJROTC program. As part of the evening's Traditions, Bowie High School

recognized its Navy Ball Court. C/SR Kolapo was crowned Navy Ball king, and C/SR Rivera was crowned Navy Ball Queen. The ceremony concluded with its traditional cake-cutting. The SNSI of all the high schools presented the youngest cadet with a slice of cake, symbolizing the passing of knowledge and responsibility from one generation to another.

Overall, the 2026 Navy Ball was a memorable and meaningful night for cadets, parents, and instructors!

## Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Celebrates 25 Years of Advocacy for Foster Youth in Prince George's County

By PRESS OFFICER  
CASA/Prince George's County

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, Md. (April 30, 2026)—Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Prince George's County recruits, trains, and supports community volunteers to advocate for children and youth who have experienced abuse and neglect and are involved in the foster care system. CASA is celebrating their 25th anniversary, marking a quarter-century of ensuring that children who have experienced abuse and neglect in Prince George's County have a powerful, consistent voice in court and throughout their journey to safety and stability.

Since its founding in February 1992, CASA/Prince George's County has grown from a small, volunteer-driven program into a nationally recognized leader in child welfare advocacy, serving 150–200 children and young people each year. Over 25 years, CASA advocates have worked to disrupt cycles of abuse and poverty for over a thousand children to navigate complex court systems, reduce time in foster care, and improve overall stability.

As Court Appointed Special Advocate looks ahead, they share their commitment to expanding equitable, youth-informed advocacy so that no young person faces the transition to adulthood alone.

"I wish that every child in foster care could have a CASA. It really helps," says Tim, a Former Foster Youth.

### A Legacy of Impact and Innovation

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Prince George's County's 25-year history reflects both deep community roots and a willingness to lead system-level change. Key milestones include the launch



PHOTO COURTESY COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA)/PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

**CASA advocates ensure that children who have experienced abuse and neglect in Prince George's County have a powerful, consistent voice in court and throughout their journey to safety and stability.**

of the Transition Aged Youth (TAY) Program; contributions to the Foster Care Bill of Rights and Model Court; national and state recognitions for diversity, volunteer excellence, and child welfare leadership; supporting the establishment of the YES Center for transition aged foster youth; and participation in the Thrive Prince George's Guaranteed Income Program.

"CASA's strength has always been its people—our volunteers, staff, partners, and supporters," said John Greene, Board Chair of CASA/Prince George's County. "For 25 years, this organization has shown what is possible when a community comes together to protect children's best interests. As we celebrate this milestone, we are also setting our sights on the future—ensuring CASA has the resources and vision to meet growing needs with compassion and excellence."

### Looking to the Next 25 Years

As a part of its 25th anniversary, Court Appointed Special Advocate has launched a year-long awareness and engagement campaign alongside strategic planning to scale impact, strengthen partnerships, and expand its continuum of care for current and former foster youth. Community investment remains critical to meeting increasing demand and sustaining high-quality advocacy.

"Celebrating 25 years is not just about looking back," says Yolanda Johnson, CASA's Executive Director. "It's about committing ourselves to the next generation of children and young adults who deserve safety, stability, and opportunity."

For more information, visit [www.pgcasa.org](http://www.pgcasa.org)

# COMMENTARY

## Marc Morial

President and CEO, National Urban League



### To Be Equal:

## The WSJ Got it Wrong: It's This Administration Who Has a Jim Crow Fantasy

*"The consequences are likely to be far-reaching and grave. Today's decision renders Section 2 all but a dead letter. In the States where that law continues to matter—the States still marked by residential segregation and racially polarized voting—minority voters can now be cracked out of the electoral process."*

—Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan

Instead of taking an objective look at the state of voting rights in this country that is rooted in its history to exploit rather than provide equality, the Wall Street Journal's editorial board came together to draft a piece titled "Democrats Have

a Jim Crow Fantasy."

The piece suggests that the Supreme Court ruling in *Louisiana v. Callais* likely will have no meaningful impact on voting rights, basing its argument on the fact that Black voter turnout in midterms increased after *Shelby v. Holder* in 2013.

After cherry-picking statistics about midterm turnout in 2018 and 2022, the board had the audacity to state that "Many states in the South—including Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia—have no-excuse absentee voting" while completely ignoring the fact that the administration is aggressively trying to limit ab-

sentee voting ahead of this year's midterms.

It also failed to mention that since 2020, an election with record voter turnout because of mail-in ballots, states responded by passing a record number of voter suppression laws with tactics that include: enforcing strict voter ID laws, shown to disproportionately impact lower income voters, purging voter rolls, and in many majority Black communities, literally removing ballot boxes.

Regarding *Shelby v. Holder*, the piece also ignored how the decision reduced Black political participation.

Using nearly one billion individual voter-file records, researchers at the Brennan Center for Justice found that in the average county formerly subject to Section 5 preclearance, the relative participation of nonwhite voters worsened after federal oversight ended.

Critically, the study estimates that absent Shelby County, the white-Black turnout gap would have grown by only about 4-5 percentage points by 2022. Instead, it grew by roughly 9 points, nearly double what national trends alone would predict. That divergence reflects a causal effect of ending preclearance, not mere coincidence.

It doesn't take a study to see how Louisiana v. Callais will impact Black voter representation in Congress; we can look at the arms race to re-district the South that took place within days of the decision.

The editorial closed out by saying that "The Court's Callais ruling may result in less racial polarization to the extent that both parties will have to compete more vigorously for minority voters rather than packing them into majority-minority districts for partisan gain."

As we see with states immediately rushing to eliminate any competition in their newly drawn maps, it's clear that the real fantasy is both parties competing for minority voters.

Louisiana went as far as to cancel its primary elections to redraw a map that could potentially eliminate all of its Black districts and Tennessee created a map that establishes a one-party system that eliminates the only sitting Black member of Congress the state has.

No one claims that today resembles 1965 Selma in form. But the data show that federal oversight mattered, and its removal disproportionately burdened minority voters.

Callais was yet another nail in the coffin of the Voting Rights Act. It co-signs the dilution of the votes of Black communities which may result in the reduction of Black congressional representation in numbers worse than after Reconstruction.

Calling this reality a "fantasy" is not analysis; it is evasion and only underscores the urgency of restoring the protections that once enforced them.

—May 9, 2026

# HEALTH *and* WELLNESS

## A Call to Action to Help Fight Kidney Failure in At-Risk Communities: American Kidney Fund Urges People to be APOL1 Aware

Newly established AMKD Coalition unites leading voices to address need to heighten awareness of APOL1-mediated kidney disease (AMKD)

By PRESS OFFICER  
American Kidney Fund

ROCKVILLE, Md. (April 28, 2026)—April 28 marked the third annual APOL1-Mediated Kidney Disease (AMKD) Awareness Day, a day established by the American Kidney Fund (AKF) to encourage others to be "APOL1 Aware" by educating communities about this genetic form of rapidly progressing kidney disease. Support for AMKD Awareness Day is provided by Vertex Pharmaceuticals Incorporated.

In support of its work on AMKD, AKF is proud to announce the newly established APOL1 Coalition, a multi-year project to define priority needs, strengthen collaboration and centralize resources about AMKD. Charter members of the coalition, many of whom have been at the forefront of efforts to increase understanding of AMKD, include leading patient advocates, scientists, industry members and professional organizations. Support for the APOL1 Coalition is provided by AstraZeneca.

"Most people are unaware of the fact that APOL1-mediated kidney disease advances faster than many other kidney diseases and can develop at a young age. AMKD's aggressive nature compels us to ensure that people who could be at risk are informed so that they can be proactive about their kidney health," said LaVarne A. Burton, President and CEO of AKF. "The American Kidney Fund calls on communities to support our efforts to drive awareness and education about AMKD. The more you know about your ancestry, the better you can protect your future, and your family's future."

### Who does AMKD affect?

While everyone has two copies of the APOL1 gene, people of

certain African ancestry are more likely to have APOL1 gene variants (mutations) that cause AMKD. People who are Black, African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, and/or Hispanic/Latino with two inherited APOL1 risk variants have an increased likelihood of developing AMKD.

- An estimated 13% of Black Americans have two APOL1 variants, which carries a roughly 1 in 5 risk of developing kidney disease

The link between the APOL1 gene variants and kidney disease was discovered recently—about a decade and a half ago—but research into understanding the disease is advancing steadily.

### AMKD awareness, education, advocacy and outreach activities

As part of this year's AMKD Awareness Day, a special episode of AKF's podcast, *The Kidney Collective™*, is now live, featuring a conversation between Burton and Alonzo Mourning, basketball Hall-of-Famer diagnosed with AMKD and paid spokesperson for Vertex Pharmaceuticals. Burton will also provide remarks today about AMKD at the National Minority Quality Forum's Annual National Leadership Summit on Health Disparities.

"AMKD Awareness Day is an important opportunity to elevate the voices and experiences of people and their families affected by APOL1-mediated kidney disease," said Amit Sachdev, Chief Patient and External Affairs Officer at Vertex Pharmaceuticals. "Vertex is proud to partner with the American Kidney Fund to deepen education, advance advocacy and better support those most impacted by this genetic kidney disease."

Ongoing education, awareness and advocacy efforts also include:

- Educational sessions on AMKD at the National Society of Black Engineers Annual Convention and the Renal Physicians Association conference in April

- Collaborating with organizations such as Black Greek Letter Organizations on educational efforts
- Training AKF's Kidney Health Coaches to present about AMKD in their local communities.
- Hosting a professional webinar about AMKD, highlighting research and evolving standards of AMKD patient care
- Educational messaging in doctors' offices across the country
- Working with influencers to amplify educational information about AMKD
- Translating educational materials to Spanish
- Promoting educational messages in select Urban One radio markets
- AKF Ambassadors are advocating for passage of the New Era of Preventing End-Stage Kidney Disease Act and the Access to Genetic Counselor Services Act with their members of Congress.

AMKD Awareness Day is recognized annually on the last Tuesday of April during National Minority Health Month.

It's not too late to help spread awareness of AMKD and its connection to kidney disease—supporters may download the AMKD Awareness Day Community Toolkit, which includes resources to share on social media, within a workplace or community organizations and more. They can also find AMKD Awareness Day graphics to share at <https://socialpresskit.com/amkd> and use the hashtag #APOL1aware.

*The American Kidney Fund (AKF) fights kidney disease on all fronts as the nonprofit with the greatest direct impact on people with kidney disease. AKF works on behalf of the 1 in 7 Americans living with kidney disease, and the millions more at risk, with an unmatched scope of programs that support people wherever they are in their fight against kidney disease—from prevention through transplant. AKF fights for kidney health for all through programs that address early detection, disease management, financial assistance, clinical research, innovation and advocacy. AKF is one of the nation's top-rated nonprofits, investing 96 cents of every donated dollar in programs, and it has received 24 consecutive 4-Star ratings from Charity Navigator as well as the Platinum Seal of Transparency from Candid, formerly known as GuideStar. Visit [KidneyFund.org](http://KidneyFund.org), or connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.*

## Council Member Blegay to Introduces Legislation to Expand Fibroid Healthcare Support

By PRESS OFFICER  
Prince George's County Council Media

On Tuesday, April 28, Council Member Wala Blegay (At-Large) introduce[d] three pieces of legislation increasing support for fibroid patients while aiming to expand access to education, early screening, and treatment options in Prince George's County.

The legislation highlights the significant impact fibroids have on women's health, particularly noting that Black women face higher rates of fibroid development and more severe symptoms. Research published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology shows that uterine fibroids are the most common benign gynecologic tumors, with more than 80% of African American women and approximately 70% of white women developing fibroids by age 50. Early detection, improved access to specialists, and culturally competent outreach are central components of the legislation.

CB-36-2026 would provide reasonable work accommodations for county employees or contractors experiencing severe menstrual or uterine fibroid-related symptoms, including increased remote work days or more flexible leave policies.

CR-30-2026 would launch a comprehensive fibroid educational

outreach and care campaign in partnership with the Prince George's County Health Department. It would promote greater awareness of fibroid symptoms, encourage early diagnosis through accessible screening, and support efforts to ensure women can more easily navigate care and treatment options. The resolution also calls for partnerships with community organizations, churches, and women's groups to expand education efforts throughout the county.

CR-31-2026 would encourage the State of Maryland and the federal government to increase funding for fibroid research, improve insurance coverage for fibroid treatments, and expand reproductive healthcare access.

"This legislation is about ensuring that women in our county have the information, resources, and access they need to make informed decisions about their health," said Council Member Blegay. "This is personal for me as I have experienced the impact of fibroids firsthand. I had fibroids that grew to the size of a five-month pregnancy, and I was nearly forced into surgery. At one point, my life was at risk. No woman should have to navigate that kind of fear without clear information, early screening, and access to the right care. When data shows that Black women are disproportionately affected, it becomes even more critical that we invest in education, early detection, and culturally competent care that meets women where they are."

## The Prince George's Post

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# BUSINESS AND FINANCE

## Social Security Matters

Ask Rusty:

### I'm Still Working; Why Didn't I Get a Higher Social Security Benefit?

By RUSSELL GLOOR,  
National Social Security Advisor at the AMAC Foundation,  
the non-profit arm of the  
Association of Mature American Citizens

**Dear Rusty:** I began collecting benefits at age 72 and am now 78. Since that time, I have continued to work and have contributed over \$40,000 to Social Security over the last six years. At the time of my retirement, I was informed that the Social Security Administration (SSA) would review my contributions annually and replace lower-earning years from my 35-year record with my current higher-earning years.

Despite my current annual income exceeding \$100,000, I have not seen an increase in my benefit amount over the past six years. I recently met with an SSA representative who confirmed that my benefits are being reviewed annually but did not provide specific details or evidence of these adjustments. Could you please advise me on how to formally verify that my benefits are being accurately reviewed and updated to reflect my continued contributions? **Signed: Collecting and Still Working**

**Dear Collecting:** For information, your contributions (from FICA payroll taxes) to Social Security over the last 6 years are not what determines if you get an increase to your monthly SS benefit. Although you contributed to SS since you started receiving SS benefits, those contributions do not affect your monthly SS benefit. Your monthly SS benefit is based only the highest inflation-adjusted 35 years of earnings over your lifetime. And for your monthly benefit to change, your current earnings each year would need to replace at least one of those 35 historical, inflation-adjusted year earnings.

We regularly hear from those who do benefit from SSA's regular review of work earnings after they start receiving monthly SS benefits, and our Advisory staff includes two individuals with a combined 70 years of service with the Social Security Administration. Thus, we are comfortable saying that SSA does, in fact, review your earnings annually to see if your monthly SS payment should be higher. From a process standpoint, SSA receives your annual earnings information from the IRS (i.e., directly from your annual tax return) by mid-year annually, after which SSA evaluates your recent earnings to see if an increase in your monthly SS benefit is warranted. If so, that increase is automatically applied (usually around October each year), and you are paid the extra amount retroactively to the beginning of the year.

What you may not realize is that your lifetime earnings (your historical earnings) are adjusted for inflation. This is a good thing, because that means your current monthly SS benefit is calculated using today's dollar values for your past earnings, rather than the actual money amounts you originally earned and received. For example, \$50,000 of 1990 earnings would be worth about \$125,000 today. Which also means that those 1990 earnings would only yield a higher current Social Security benefit if your recent earnings were more than \$125,000. And this is true for all 35 years of lifetime earnings used to calculate your current monthly Social Security benefit.

The best way for you to ensure that you are getting the right monthly benefit amount is to first obtain your lifetime earnings history from Social Security. This is most easily obtained through your online "my Social Security" account at [www.ssa.gov/myaccount](http://www.ssa.gov/myaccount). If you don't have an online account set up, you can also request an "Earnings Statement" by calling Social Security at 1.800.772.1213 (or call your local SS field office to request it). Next, I suggest you use Social Security's "Online Benefits Calculator" explained and available at this link: <https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/AnypiaAp-plet.html>

If, after this, you believe you should be getting a higher monthly SS benefit because of your recent earnings, you can again contact SSA and tell them you believe they did not properly adjust your current SS benefit for your most recent earnings. Following that, you can submit a "Request for Reconsideration" (form SSA-561) which will result in a full separate review of your case by an independent SSA person, followed (some months later) by a formal written determination on your assertion. If you received a letter from SSA because of your previous meeting with them, include a copy of that letter with your "Request for Reconsideration."

*This article is intended for information purposes only and does not represent legal or financial guidance. It presents the opinions and interpretations of the AMAC Foundation's staff, trained and accredited by the National Social Security Association (NSSA). NSSA and the AMAC Foundation and its staff are not affiliated with or endorsed by the Social Security Administration or any other governmental entity. To submit a question, visit our website ([amacfoundation.org/programs/social-security-advisory](http://amacfoundation.org/programs/social-security-advisory)) or email us at [ssadviser@amacfoundation.org](mailto:ssadviser@amacfoundation.org).*

The 2.4 million member Association of Mature American Citizens [AMAC] [www.amac.us](http://www.amac.us) is a vibrant, vital senior advocacy organization that takes its marching orders from its members. AMAC Action is a non-profit, non-partisan organization representing the membership in our nation's capital and in local Congressional Districts throughout the country. And the AMAC Foundation ([www.AmacFoundation.org](http://www.AmacFoundation.org)) is the Association's non-profit organization, dedicated to supporting and educating America's Seniors. Together, we act and speak on the Association members' behalf, protecting their interests and offering a practical insight on how to best solve the problems they face today. Live long and make a difference by joining us today at [www.amac.us/join-amac](http://www.amac.us/join-amac).

## Educational Systems Federal Credit Union Named a 2026 USA Today Top Workplace

By PRESS OFFICER  
Educational Systems FCU

GREENBELT, Md. (May 5, 2026)—Educational Systems Federal Credit Union has been named a 2026 USA Today Top Workplace, a national recognition that honors organizations with strong workplace cultures shaped by employee feedback.

The award is based entirely on confidential feedback from our employees, referred to as Ambassadors, through the Energage Workplace Survey. The survey evaluates key aspects of the workplace experience, including leadership, organizational alignment and employee engagement.

"We are honored to be recognized as a USA Today Top Workplace," said Girado Smith, President/CEO of Educational Systems FCU. "This recognition reflects the voices of our Ambassadors and their shared commitment to fostering a culture built on collaboration, respect and service. Our Ambassadors are at the center of everything we do, and this acknowledgment reinforces the importance of continuing to invest in their experience and growth."

"Earning a USA TODAY Top Work-

places award is a testament to an organization's credibility and commitment to a people-first culture," said Eric Rubino, CEO of Energage. "This award, driven by real employee feedback, is more than just a recognition—it's proof that your employees believe in the organization and its leadership. Job seekers and customers look for this trusted badge of credibility and excellence. It signals a company that values its people, and that kind of culture resonates in today's competitive market."

The Top Workplaces program draws on data from millions of employees across more than 70,000 organizations and is informed by more than 20 years of research into workplace culture. Organizations recognized as Top Workplaces demonstrate a commitment to building environments where employees feel supported, engaged and empowered to contribute to their organization's success.

Educational Systems Federal Credit Union remains committed to creating a workplace that supports professional development, encourages collaboration and enables Ambassadors to deliver meaningful service to members and the communities they serve.

Educational Systems Federal Credit Union has proudly served the education community since 1955. With \$1.3 billion in assets and 13 branches, the Credit Union serves over 80,000 members of the education community including school employees, students, parents and individuals working for education-related organizations. For more information, visit [esfcu.org](http://esfcu.org).

Energage is a purpose-driven company that helps organizations turn employee feedback into useful business intelligence and credible employer recognition through Top Workplaces. Built on 20 years of culture research and the results from 30 million employees surveyed across more than 80,000 organizations, Energage delivers the most accurate competitive benchmark available. With access to a unique combination of patented analytic tools and expert guidance, Energage customers lead the competition with an engaged workforce and an opportunity to gain recognition for their people-first approach to culture. For more information or to nominate your organization, visit [energage.com](http://energage.com) or [topworkplaces.com](http://topworkplaces.com).

## A State Program That Boosted Small Businesses Is Getting Booted

By FIONA FLOWERS  
Capital News Service

TEMPLE HILLS, Md. (May 5, 2026)—Three years ago, Jennifer Ramos and her husband, Alex Aguilar, began selling handmade tamales from a stand off the side of the road in Temple Hills, an area in Prince George's County. The tamales were such a hit that business boomed and early last year, the couple transitioned to a food truck. Now, in just a few months, they're preparing to open La Patrona, a Mexican carry-out restaurant and market.

"We started dreaming up a more expanded menu of authentic Mexican eats," said Ramos, adding that the couple wants to emulate the iconic "street foods that you find in Mexico City... we want to be like a market for it, in one place, in one lot."

The quick rise from a road-side table to restaurant was made possible partly by a microgrant from a program called Business Boost, operated by the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (DCHD). Business Boost provides awards between \$20,000 and \$50,000 to support small businesses in designated "sustainable communities," which are older communities where the state wants to promote growth in ways that are environmentally, economically and socially responsible.

Launched in 2024, the program was designed to address a financing gap for small businesses that had outgrown home-based operations but lacked the means to expand. According to the DCHD, traditional lending does not accommodate smaller capital needs including lease deposits, equipment purchases or minor build-outs. This leaves viable businesses unable to expand, a problem that DCHD was trying to address.

"Small businesses are the engine that drives our economy," said Allison Foster, director of public affairs at DCHD. "Without this early support, otherwise viable businesses can stall before they have the opportunity to generate revenue or create jobs."

Foster said Business Boost has funded 63 businesses since its inception.

However, the future of the program remains uncertain. It was not included in the Maryland state budget for the 2027 fiscal year, signed by Governor Wes Moore on April 8. "It may be revived in coming years based upon assessment of needs," Foster said. "The Department is in the process of repositioning its limited capital budget resources toward other initiatives through its Division of Business Development."

Anirban Basu, an economist and founder of the Baltimore-based Sage Policy Group, noted that many localities across the U.S. are using state-funded programs to bolster entrepreneurship and increase the tax base. But the approach typically leaves mixed results. "It's a risky proposition since many of these companies will fail," Basu said. "However, when success occurs, it is a beautiful thing to behold."

In Charles County, sisters Emily and Shannon Burke are preparing to move their holistic wellness spa from a 1,600-square-foot space in a strip mall into a 3,200-square-foot space in a historic building on Main Street in La Plata.

The pair launched Sublime Soul in 2021, but is rebranding as Blue Rose Wellness. "The name change was necessary," said Emily Burke. "We wanted something that sounded more established and clinical to match the level of technology we were bringing in. Sublime Soul felt like a boutique; Blue Rose Wellness feels like a center."

The sisters had received an initial grant through the Charles County Business Growth Advantage program. This fueled their desire for commercial expansion, but they needed more funding for equipment. Burke submitted an application for the Business Boost program in 2024 at the recommendation of representatives from the Charles County Economic Development Department.

"They actually had to recommend us,"

said Burke. "Once we were awarded it from the state, the economic department at the county had to say 'Yeah, this is a business that operates in our county, and we recommend you give it to them.' And they were awesome about that."

Eligible applicants had to be in good financial and legal standing, collect an annual revenue between \$50,000 and \$1 million, employ between two and 50 full-time employees and demonstrate an ability to match their own financial contribution to the amount they receive.

Business Boost selected the sisters to receive the maximum grant amount. With funding from Business Boost and Charles County, along with the sisters' matching contribution, they were able to purchase roughly \$200,000 in equipment, including a 1,600-pound sensory deprivation float tank and a medical-grade red light therapy bed.

"The grant is directly responsible for us being able to pull the trigger on that equipment," Burke said. "It is definitely what I would say jump-started us." The sisters expect the transition into their new space to drive revenue and increase foot traffic once their doors open later in May.

The funding will enable the business to increase its staff, one of the goals of the Business Boost program. Before the expansion, the sisters operated with one employee who worked two days a week. Their new team includes four employees; store manager, an executive assistant, a media specialist and a sales associate.

For La Patrona, the grant addressed the high cost of entering the restaurant business. In addition to real estate and construction costs, restaurants in Maryland must install commercial grease traps, which prevent oil and grease from entering the sewer system.

Ramos said the cost of a grease trap alone was \$30,000, a sum her business could not have covered while also managing lease obligations and construction costs. "The grant was game changing," she said. "Instead of just thinking about a second food truck, it gave us the ability to dream bigger and start a real restaurant."

The Business Boost initiative relies on both direct outreach and digital marketing. Ramos said she did not find the program on her own. Instead, a program representative visited her food truck, recognized the business's growth potential and encouraged her to apply.

Ramos submitted her application in the spring of 2024. She said it took roughly six months to hear back that she had been selected and was wired the funding in bulk in spring 2025.

The restaurant is expected to open in this month. La Patrona has already hired two outside employees, and the new storefront will serve as a centralized market with an expanded menu of Mexican street foods.

Meanwhile, the food truck continues to operate in the lot of the future restaurant. "We didn't even think about brick and mortar before," said Ramos. "Now that we see what's possible and we know we can do it, we're definitely thinking about expanding, maybe into DC."



La Patrona food truck in Temple Hills, Md. in April 2026. Soon a La Patrona restaurant will open nearby, thanks to Maryland Business Boost.

# EarthTalk® Q&A Microplastics & Cancer: New Links Emerging

By Krisha Chhabra | May 1, 2026

Dear EarthTalk:

Is there any evidence suggesting a link between exposure to microplastics and the development of various forms of cancer?

—Dave B., Atlanta, GA

Each year companies produce nearly 460 million metric tons of plastic, a number that is projected to reach 1.1 billion by 2050. Microplastics, defined as plastic particles smaller than five millimeters, or smaller than a grain of rice, have become ubiquitous in the environment. Major sources include plastic pellets, personal care products, paint and resins, synthetic textiles and the breakdown of larger plastics like bags and containers. Even driving contributes, as the tires and road wear release plastic fragments into the air.

Tracey Woodruff, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of San Francisco who studied the impacts of microplastics, remarks, "Nothing surprises me about how many places plastic is in anymore, but it is sad and surprising in the fact that these things that are in our food... could be releasing microplastics." On average, a

person consumes 39,000 to 52,000 microplastic particles annually. One recent study found that chewing gum can release hundreds to thousands of microplastics into the saliva. On average, 100 microplastics are released per gram of gum, with each piece of gum typically weighing two to six grams. Sanjay Mohanty, the project's principal investigator and an engineering professor at UCLA remarks that "chewing gum is the only food that is made up of plastics. Yet, most don't know."

Microplastics enter the human body through nasal, dermal and oral routes, contaminating multiple organs. Epidemiological studies link exposure to various diseases. In one review of 34 studies, researchers found increased risk of lung cancer tied to PVC microplastic dust. Chemicals found in microplastics, like BPA, phthalates and PFAS, can disrupt processes related to reproduction, growth and metabolism. Co-authors found that exposure to microplastics caused an acceleration of ovarian cancer tumor growth in mice, which could potentially cause similar patterns in humans. Also, the rising rates of colorectal cancer in people under 50 are suspected to be driven by environmental factors like microplastics. As microplastics pass through the gastrointestinal tract, they inter-

act with the colon and rectum and potentially disrupt the protective colonic mucus layer which could increase the likelihood of colorectal cancer.

To reduce exposure, microplastic researchers recommend avoiding microwaving food in plastic, switching to glass or steel water bottles, eating more grains, fruits and vegetables, and reducing red meat consumption. Using natural cleaning products like baking soda or vinegar, or products approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Safer Choice program, can also help reduce contact with harmful chemicals.

**CONTACTS:** I'm a Microplastics Researcher. Here's How To Limit Their Dangers | UC San Francisco, ucsf.edu/news/2024/02/427161/how-to-limit-microplastics-dangers; Chewing Gum Releases Thousands of Microplastics Into Saliva, healthline.com/health-news/chewing-gum-microplastics-saliva-study.

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### Q&A from A1

**Q: Why do you think Maryland was attractive to Sphere Entertainment?**

A: Under the Moore-Miller administration, we have been very business development minded and agile in our pursuit of new businesses. We work in partnership with local and county partners. Sphere Entertainment (officials) saw that partnership, they saw our agility, they saw what we have delivered and they wanted to be a part of that. It's also 24/7 foot traffic. Las Vegas is Las Vegas, but there's no other place in this region like the National Harbor and Prince George's County when it comes to the foot traffic that would be there.

**Q: What will be the anticipated economic impact of the Sphere?**

A: The economic analysis showed that it was going to be a \$1.5 billion annual economic benefit to the surrounding area and the state. That's fabulous.

**Q: Last year, thousands of federal workers in Maryland were laid off. How did those layoffs impact Maryland businesses?**

A: No state has been impacted to the degree that Maryland has with regards to the number of federal jobs lost. That is tragic for those individuals and their families and their loved ones. There's also consultants, engineering firms, logistics firms that support some of those federal departments and agencies that have been cut back. That has also increased the amount of jobs that we've lost in Maryland as a direct result of some of the policies coming out of Washington. This can't be overlooked, there's a ripple effect when we don't have money in our pockets. We don't do as much grocery shopping, we don't take vacations, we don't go to the movies.

**Q: What are the economic benefits of data centers and how do those weigh against the potential drain on resources and energy?**

A: It increases the tax base so that minimizes a need to raise taxes. That's a general statement, but it applies to data centers. Data centers also bring a lot of construction jobs.

Absolutely, there are challenges. If you look back to Gov. Moore's State of the State remarks in January, he said that data centers need to hire Marylanders. Those data centers need to bring their own energy. They need to not raise energy rates for our residents. We also are taking a look at what's the impact to traffic (and) any concerns the local community has. We are not saying no to data centers, we're saying 'Yes and this is what needs to happen.'

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