



At noon on Wednesday, January 13, the 442nd session of the Maryland General Assembly will convene in Annapolis. That much is certain. What will happen after that is anyone's guess. Some have speculated that the legislators will pass the budget and go home; others are expecting that the session will run its full course and adjourn, as scheduled, on April 12. What is certain is that the session, for as long as it lasts, will be unlike any other in Maryland history.

With some specified exceptions, the legislative buildings

will be closed to the general public. That means that there will be no opportunities for the traditional popping into offices or buttonholing of legislators in hallways by lobbyists or the public. Outdoor rallies outside the State House will still be permitted if allowed under City of Annapolis rules then in effect. In one positive new development - especially if it continues after the end of the pandemic - all floor sessions, committee hearings, subcommittee meetings, and committee voting sessions will be live-streamed on the General Assembly's website. Neither the Senate nor the House will meet everyday during the early part of the session, to minimize the number of people who need to be present in the legislative buildings. House and Senate chamber galleries will generally be closed to all but a limited number of reporters.

The Senate and House Leadership have each developed guidelines for how the legislature's business will be done in the face of the pandemic, with the acknowledgment that changing circumstances may require new adaptations.

The Senate will have "staged" operational plans, depending on the level of disease on the legislative "campus," (i.e., not necessarily within the state or even Annapolis city). Under optimal health conditions, the Senate may operate more or less as normal with these exceptions: floor sessions will be limited to two hours, desks have been distanced in the chamber, plexiglass shields have been installed, and some additional social distancing options are available for members who wish them; committee hearings will be held virtually, with members in their offices; voting will take place in-person in committee rooms. Office meetings with the public will be limited to two visitors at a time; guests must be escorted to and from lawmakers' offices.

Should some "documented exposures requiring quarantine" occur, floor debate and voting will move to committee rooms and be held virtually, to allow for more distance between lawmakers. Bill hearings will be held remotely, with members in their offices. Building access will be limited to legislators, staff and media. No visitors will be allowed.

If there is an "increase" in COVID-19 infections "or multiple instances

of disease activity and potential transmission; pandemic conditions," floor debate and voting will largely be suspended, at least temporarily. Virtual hearings will continue.

Of note is that a limitation on the number of bills that can be introduced, which was proposed before the onset of the pandemic, could further streamline the process.

Because of the size of the House of Delegates (141), the House Chamber cannot accommodate them all with socially distanced desks, so for floor sessions the members will be spread out among the floor itself and some annexed spaces in the House building. Delegates who desire even more space from their colleagues can sit in the gallery, where they will be allowed to vote but not participate in floor debate. Except for floor votes, Delegates are encouraged to work from home, including for committee meetings and hearings. They are discouraged from holding meetings in their offices.

Those of us who have endured hours of sitting in Annapolis in Committee hearing rooms, waiting for our bills to be called for testimony, will be thrilled to learn that, not only will committee hearings be virtual and we can testify from our own homes, but also the specific bill order will be posted on the Maryland General Assembly website the day before the hearing. Witness sign-up will be opened online through the Maryland General Assembly website 48 hours before the bill hearing. In a new development, the Senate will cap the number of witnesses at four in favor, two "favorable with amendments," and four opposed. (For more complex or contentious issues, the numbers may be doubled.) The House will cap bill hearings at a maximum of 50 witnesses per bill.

As can be seen, the state legislature will be operating under new and significant constraints, and most Annapolis watchers predict that, even if the session lasts for the full ninety days, the COVID-imposed restrictions will have a measurable impact on how much the legislature gets done. Priorities are expected to be the budget, COVID response and relief, veto overrides (i.e., "Kirwan" education reforms and funding), sports betting (approved by the voters in the last election), and police reform.

Of course, as they say, "all politics is local," and Maryland horse people can be affected by actions at an even more local level, i.e., the counties. To the extent our resources permit, the MHC Government Relations Committee can work at the county level as well as the state level. Maryland has 24 local jurisdictions, each of which operates under one of three different forms of governance. The three forms are code counties, code home rule counties, and charter counties.

CODE: Code counties are governed by a board of elected county commissioners, which in turn appoints a County Administrator to run day-to-day operations. Code counties have limited legislative authority, and the State General Assembly has the full power to legislate for the county. In code counties, the county delegations to the General Assembly (i.e., the elected Delegates and Senators for that county) play an especially important role in setting county law. The six code counties are Calvert, Carroll, Garret, St. Mary's, Somerset, and Washington.

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CODE HOME RULE: Six counties have adopted “code home rule.” Code home rule counties are also governed by boards of elected county commissioners and a board-appointed county administrator, but they have broader legislative authority than code counties. The General Assembly cannot make local law in a specific code home rule county; instead the General Assembly can make laws that applies generally to all code home rule counties only. The six “code home rule” counties are Allegany, Caroline, Charles, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Worcester.

CHARTER: Charter counties, of which there are 12, have an elected county council as well as an elected executive. Nine of them elect a council and a separate executive, two of them elect a council that also acts as the executive, and Baltimore City has an elected city council and mayor. Charter counties have the broadest authority over local law of the three forms of governance. The General Assembly can legislate only in the specific, and narrow, areas expressly set out in the county’s charter. The 12 charter counties are Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Baltimore City, Cecil, Dorchester, Frederick, Harford, Howard, Montgomery, Prince George’s, Talbot, and Wicomico.

The Government Relations Committee adapts its processes to each of the three different forms of local governance. To the extent our resources permit, we monitor the county councils of the charter counties quite closely, as many of them have broad jurisdiction over land use, agriculture, open space issues, and, recently, the pandemic response. We monitor the boards of commissioners in code home rule counties for local zoning and animal control issues. And in code counties, we monitor the

local bills introduced in the General Assembly by the county delegations (as we do for all counties). We encourage all our members to familiarize themselves with their county’s form of government and its leaders and processes, and to be MHC’s eyes and ears on the ground, to assist us in monitoring developments at the local level. With your help, we can ensure that our members get the information they need, in a timely manner, to have an impact on local decisions that affect our lives, our horses, our businesses and our farms.