

# Change coming to Annapolis

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ANNAPOLIS – Change is in the air in the state's capital, and leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) hope to harness it to advance long-sought legislative programs such as a business tax credit benefitting children in public and nonpublic schools.

Republican Gov.-elect Larry Hogan will be inaugurated in Annapolis Jan. 21, seven days after the General Assembly convenes for its 435th legislative session. Maryland's lawmaking body will include 11 new members in the Senate and 58 new members in the House of Delegates.

"We have already been in close touch with Gov.-elect Hogan and many members of his transition team and his administration," said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the MCC, legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops. "We're pleased to see many of those number who are close friends to the conference on both sides of the aisle."

With Maryland facing a deficit of approximately \$1.2 billion, Russell said the overriding concern for the governor and lawmakers will be closing the budget gap. She hopes they do it in a way that does not hurt the poor and most vulnerable.

"The church is known in Annapolis for being so genuinely bipartisan," she said. "We can be helpful to both the leadership of the General Assembly and the administration in helping to build bridges and reach consensus."

With a new governor who has been vocal in support of nonpublic schools, the MCC is optimistic the state can pass the Maryland Education Credit.

The measure would provide a tax credit for businesses that donate to nonprofit organizations that support public and nonpublic school students. The money would be designated for academic tutoring, books, supplies, technology, tuition assistance and special needs services.

Outgoing Gov. Martin J. O'Malley supported the measure, but did not make it a legislative priority. It languished in the House of Delegates for years.

"We have an administration that outwardly supports it, we have new members of the House and we have renewed business outreach," said Garrett J. O'Day, MCC associate director for education and family life. "We have a strong and robust coalition trying to find ways to motivate the legislature to pass this bill."

O'Day said the legislation, which would designate up to \$15 million annually for the credit, has had strong bipartisan support and numerous sponsors from both political

parties. He noted that Maryland's nonpublic schools save the state more than \$1.5 billion in per-pupil expenditures every year. Catholic schools alone save the state approximately \$710 million.

During the legislative session, O'Day said the MCC will also closely monitor the budget to make sure the \$6.04 million textbook and technology program for nonpublic schools remains intact, along with the \$3.5 million nonpublic aging schools program, which helps schools with deferred maintenance projects.

Dana Davenport, the MCC's newly appointed associate director for social concerns, said her priority in the new year is making sure the state's safety-net programs do not get slashed as lawmakers rein in the budget.

"It looks promising that even with the structural deficit, the safety-net programs won't likely have the greatest cuts," she said.

Davenport will be working on a paid sick-leave bill to help working families and will promote the creation of a fund to benefit families whose children are injured during childbirth.

Building on the successful passage last year of a bill benefiting the families of children with Down syndrome, Andrea Garvey, MCC associate director for respect life, said she will be looking for "legislative opportunities" to provide other support for people with disabilities. She also stands ready to fight any attempts to legalize physician-assisted suicide.

"We want to make sure the laws reflect the dignity of life," she said.

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