

PATH members meet with Howard County executive candidates

Ulman, Kittleman agree to work with group on health coverage, jobs for youth, services for seniors

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Posted 9/22/10

In the next seven weeks before the Nov. 2 general election, there will likely be many occasions that highlight the differences between the two candidates running for Howard County executive.

This week's meeting of People Acting Together in Howard was not one of them.

At the Tuesday evening meeting, held at the Owen Brown Interfaith Center in Columbia, incumbent County Executive Kenneth Ulman, a Democrat, and his GOP challenger, Trent Kittleman, both agreed to work with the group on its top priorities: expanding health care coverage, more services for senior citizens and creating job opportunities for young people.

While they disagreed slightly on how they would handle the problems, both candidates committed to meeting with PATH in the first three months of their administration, if elected, to address the three issues.

Although lacking in controversy, the event was not short on attendees, drawing some 230 people from various religious congregations across the county. PATH, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, is a non-partisan, interfaith citizens' organization that focusses on solving community problems and represents more than 1,000 residents.

"Elections have meaning only if the issues and the themes discussed are the ones that have meaning to the voters," Rev. Carletta Allen of Locust United Methodist Church told the candidates at the meeting, adding that "these issues do" have meaning to Howard County voters.

Health care is one of PATH's majority priorities, and several members spent their Saturdays this summer knocking on doors to spread the word about Healthy Howard, a county-subsidized health program for the uninsured.

But group members said they were concerned about health care affordability in the future. Healthy Howard will go out of business in 2014 because the federal health care bill passed by Congress this year will require every American citizen to have health insurance, or pay a fine for declining it.

"Our work this summer was a great start on health care," PATH member Montgomery Young said before asking the candidates for their ideas. "But we want to make sure the people we linked up with health care" will still be able to afford it under the new federal law.

“Will you use your power as county executive to do everything you can to support a non-profit health insurance co-op in the state of Maryland?” he asked the candidates.

Ulman said he combed through the federal health care bill with Dr. Peter Beilenson, the county’s health officer and chairman of the Healthy Howard Board of Directors, and the two “believe that Healthy Howard the non-profit has all the elements” the bill says are needed to form a non-profit health insurance co-op.

“We fit the description to a T,” Ulman added after the meeting. He said that through the partnerships it has created, Howard County could become one of the first jurisdictions in the country to form such a co-op.

Kittleman, acknowledging that people in her party had criticized Healthy Howard, said she supported PATH’s door-knocking campaign and the grassroots component of Healthy Howard.

“I love the fact that it’s a non-profit, but I didn’t like the fact that it was top down,” she said.

Unlike Ulman, Kittleman would not guarantee her support for a non-profit health insurance co-op, though she said she is “a strong proponent of non-profits.”

“I am not going to say an absolute ‘yes,’ ” she said, but “I will do everything I can to look at it (and) I will talk with PATH.”

Ruth Smith, 87, who has lived in Howard County for 41 years, talked about the need for more services for senior residents, to allow them to “age in place.”

This past year, Smith, of Dayton, decided she was no longer physically able to change the light-bulb in her 10-foot high ceiling. She said she hired someone, who charged her nearly \$100.

“Seniors need screened resources to find safe workers for very reasonable wages,” Smith said, as an example of a service the county could provide.

Ulman said he was “very proud” of the work the county has done in providing services to seniors, mentioning such services as occupational therapists that conduct home visits and a staff handyman who makes “small improvements” like building ramps to public facilities. But he acknowledged the need to do more.

“The only way we can do it is partnership with you, with other non-profits and faith-based organizations,” he said.

Kittleman, however, said her biggest concern for the county’s senior residents is not that the county does not provide enough services but that property values are so high that “people are having problems remaining in their homes.”

She said she wants elderly residents to remain in Howard but “the increased value of your home doesn’t help and the increased taxes can hurt.”

Two PATH members spoke about the need for the county to create more youth employment opportunities.

Laurie Bulka of Columbia United Christian Church spoke on behalf of her three elder children, ages 18, 20 and 22, who are all Wilde Lake High School graduates who attend the University of Maryland.

“This summer, only one of the three was able to find a job,” Bulka said, adding that most young people who are able to find employment do so “based on having good connections.”

Aziz Iscandari, of Locust United Methodist Church, said he was one of the county’s youths who could not find a job.

“We need jobs for students like me, ones who don’t qualify for Pell Grants but whose parents can’t afford to pay \$50,000 a year for the cost of tuition, room and board,” he said.

In asking the candidates about supporting youth employment opportunities, Young provided a specific idea on how to do so.

“If Howard County receives funding to reduce run-off into the Chesapeake Bay, will you commit to using a significant portion of the funds to provide employment to Howard County high school and college students?” he asked.

“We think that’s a great way to connect people with opportunities,” Ulman said. “Thanks for the idea.”

After the meeting, Ulman added that it is not guaranteed the county will receive the funding or would be allowed to use the money to provide youth employment opportunities to help fix the run-off problem.

In her response, Kittleman said she didn’t know enough of the details about the funding to pledge her support to using it to provide youth jobs.

“I love the idea that was presented,” she said. “One of my goals is to make this a county where anybody who wants a job can find one.”

Both candidates also had words of praise for PATH.

“A lot of people like to point out our challenges, but you roll up your sleeves and help solve them,” Ulman said.

Said Kittleman of the benefits of working with organizations such as PATH: “I really do have a great faith in the power of creative ideas to lower the cost of solving many of our problems.”

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