

Religious, community groups seek promises from county executive candidates

Over 200 attend meeting; quick promises from Ulman, but not Kittleman

By Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun

September 23, 2010

A group of over 200 Howard County residents pushing a new fall agenda to benefit unemployed youth and the aging got quick promises of support from Democratic County Executive Ken Ulman but not from Trent Kittleman, his Republican challenger.

People Acting Together in Howard, a coalition of 15 churches, one mosque and several citizens groups, wanted both Ulman and Kittleman to support their plans for more aggressive youth employment programs and more help to allow the elderly to stay in their homes. PATH is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a group founded by the late Saul Alinsky, a well-known community organizer.

Meeting at the Owen Brown Interfaith Center on Tuesday night, the group first celebrated their summerlong efforts to find and enroll more people in Healthy Howard, Ulman's health access program for the uninsured.

The Rev. Gerry Bowen of St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church in ElkrIDGE told the crowd that PATH collected and spent \$50,000 — enough to buy health insurance for eight people — to organize a door-knocking campaign for 221 volunteers. They talked to 4,380 people, and Anne Gould, one of the volunteers, said they helped 395 people get health care, including 254 either enrolled or applying to Healthy Howard. But the task is not finished, the crowd was told.

"In 2014, I will not be able to afford health insurance [under the new federal law]. I might be penalized," said Trish Vogel, another volunteer who also belongs to Healthy Howard. "I am concerned and scared about what's going to happen to me," she said, when health insurance becomes mandatory.

To prevent that, the group asked the candidates whether they would support creation of a nonprofit health insurance co-op in Maryland under the new federal law that would deliver health insurance at lower cost to people required to buy it.

Ulman answered that he and county health officer Dr. Peter Beilenson are working toward creation of a health insurance co-op, and hope to qualify for some of the \$6 billion in federal funds that will become available in two years. Kittleman acknowledged criticism of Ulman's Healthy Howard program by some Republicans and would not commit to supporting a co-op. "I'm not going to say an absolute yes. I'll look at it," Kittleman said.

Asked next whether they would support added efforts to help seniors stay in their homes as they become more frail, Ulman and Kittleman both agreed, though she said she would be concerned about the welfare of county residents first, and would not be primarily focused on having the county serve as a national role model. Older people have trouble finding transportation and getting emergency help if they live alone. Both candidates were asked to provide free 911-capable cell phones for the elderly and create a coordinated course to teach seniors better self-care.

Both heard Ruth Smith, 87, talk about how she is still strong and healthy, but can no longer shovel snow, cut grass or change light bulbs in her home's 10-foot ceilings. "Let's go, Howard," she exhorted. More help is needed as people become unable to drive or do physical chores.

Aziz Iscandari, 20, of Long Reach told the group he couldn't find a decent summer job after his summer basketball coaching gig disappeared, and he was left to scrounge for odd jobs. Without those earnings, he said, he may not be able to afford his last two undergraduate years of college.

PATH wanted both candidates to promise to use a "significant portion" of any state funding for reducing runoff into the Chesapeake Bay to hire young people for that work.

"Yes," Ulman said. "What a great way to teach skills."

Kittleman said, "I'm a very strong believer" in young people working for their money. "I want to make this a county where anyone who wants a job can find one," she said, though she did not commit to PATH's request.

Both candidates agreed to meet with PATH leaders within three months of starting their term of office.

"I really do have a great faith in the power of creative ideas to solve our problems," Kittleman said. Ulman earlier applauded the group for not just raising questions and problems but "rolling up your sleeves and helping."

Kittleman said after the meeting that she felt at a disadvantage because Ulman has been executive for nearly four years and has a better grasp on the details of county resources and programs, but she added that because both candidates got the questions in advance, she thought the process was fair.

The Rev. Carlotta Allen of Locust United Methodist Church in Simpsonville concluded the meeting by telling the crowd that PATH's efforts come at a time when the current recession has shaken the middle class and imposed unexpected hardships on some.

"All is not well," she said, adding that middle-class parents aren't sure anymore that their children will have better lives than the previous generation has had. "What happened to so many people in our county was not supposed to happen to us. There is a profound feeling of unease. What was broken for the poor is now broken for the middle class as well."

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