



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 every day 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; com-

mittee 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 re-

Time is Running Out - Please Act Now!

The Maryland General Assembly will convene at noon on January 13. It will be a Legislative Session like no other in our legislature's long and storied history. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the legislative buildings will be closed to the general public; almost all activities will be conducted virtually. This means that our ability to meet personally with and persuade our legislators, as well as to testify on bills, will be severely curtailed. The reality of that situation means that the MHC PAC becomes even more important in our efforts to protect and promote the interests of the equestrian community. Legislators respond to PAC contributions and pay attention to organizations with robust PACs. So we must build up our PAC's war chest now!

By law, we must make our PAC disbursements to legislators before the Legislature opens its session in January. Legislators ramp up their fundraising in December, ahead of the legal deadline. So we need your PAC contribution NOW.

PLEASE DONATE TODAY - Every dollar helps, but, we need your contribution ASAP. THANK YOU!

Maryland Horse People Belong Together, are Strong Together!