



Retirement News Highlights

Friday, May 27, 2022

Adams, Lierman Describe Visions for Comptroller's Office at Tuesday Evening Forum

By Danielle E. Gaines

Maryland Matters

June 1, 2022

Maryland Democratic candidates for comptroller pledged Tuesday night to undertake efforts to bring racial and social equity to Maryland's tax system and state contracts, but they differed on recent legislative reforms of the office.

Both Democratic contenders would make history if elected: Bowie Mayor Tim Adams would be the state's first Black comptroller, and the first person with paraplegia to ever hold a statewide office in Maryland; Baltimore City Del. Brooke E. Lierman would be the state's first woman comptroller.

The winner of the July 19 Democratic primary for comptroller will face term-limited Harford County Executive Barry Glassman, who is unopposed in the Republican primary, in the general election.

Tuesday's forum was hosted by the League of Women Voters and cosponsors — Maryland Matters, Maryland Reporter, Maryland Nonprofits, Maryland Latinos Unidos and the University of Baltimore's Schaefer Center for Public Policy.

Maryland Matters Founding Editor Josh Kurtz moderated the discussion.

This year marks the first time since 1998 that there has been an open-seat race for comptroller.

The competitive election comes after incumbent Peter V.R. Franchot (D) launched a gubernatorial bid, along with nine other Democrats.

Asked about their visions for the agency, Lierman said she planned to create an "Office of the Maryland Taxpayer Advocate," which would help break down barriers to make it easier for low-income Marylanders to file for tax credits.

"The comptroller is one of only three independently elected statewide officials," Lierman said. "And so we need that comptroller to be a statewide voice and advocate on the major economic challenges facing our families and small businesses.

Adams, the founder and CEO of the multimillion-dollar defense contracting firm Systems Application & Technologies, said it was important to bring executive experience to the office of the comptroller, as Maryland's chief fiscal officer.

“It really is an executive level position, one that you need to be able to have the experience as I do, after 30 years,” Adams said. “And you have to be able to fight for people. I’ve been fighting to level the playing field and understand that and have that experience to make sure that all Marylanders can participate.”

Helping the economy

Asked about the role of the comptroller in charting the economic success of the state, Adams said it was important to “make sure that everybody pays their fair share in taxes.”

“What we have right now is where we have some corporations who simply aren’t paying their fair share,” he said. “And we need to make sure that we go after them, and make sure we close all these tax loopholes.”

Adams also said the comptroller and Board of Public Works should stop approving single-source contracts and work for state contractors who fail to meet goals for inclusion of minority and disadvantaged businesses.

Lierman, who expressed support for the same goals at various parts of the evening, specifically emphasized maintaining the state’s Triple A bond rating and spurring economic development through capital budget spending as ways to bolster the state’s economy.

“Our capital budget is our strongest job creation tool that we have as a government,” said Lierman, a former member of the House Appropriations Committee.

She also expressed support for investing state pension funds in state-based businesses, a policy Adams also supports as a “double bottom line investment.”

Monitoring state contracts

Asked what specific contracts the state has entered that should be more closely monitored, Adams said that he was concerned about public-private partnerships.

Lierman said she was concerned about a host of contracts that have been retroactively approved by the Board of Public Works during the pandemic, including controversial agreements for COVID-19 testing kits and contractors to process unemployment claims.

She said the contracts amounted to “hundreds of millions of dollars of contracts ... that essentially were a huge waste of money.”

Adams and Lierman agreed that a public-private partnership for Republican Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr.’s plan to widen parts of the Capital Beltway and I-270 with toll lanes should have included a more concrete commitment to union labor earlier in the contracting process.

Lierman and Adams also each expressed concern about continuing the widening project. Lierman said other policy decisions need to be made to tackle Beltway congestion in a more holistic way, including making sure that people can live near where they work or meaningful transit opportunities. She also said the state should complete an analysis — not done so far — to understand whether a public-private partnership or traditional building contract would be the best alternative for highway construction.

Adams said he didn't believe that paid toll lanes will help the average Marylander, that light rail should be considered as an alternative, and that the state should have a more meaningful process to allow losing bidders to challenge contracts.

Thoughts on recent reforms

The candidates were also asked about recent legislative efforts to curtail the comptroller's role in some policy decisions, including on school construction funding and enforcement of state alcohol and tobacco laws.

Lierman said that lawmakers in the General Assembly decided to establish the Interagency Commission on School Construction to speed up contracts for building and remodeling schools and that every child in Maryland should attend a school that's well-constructed, has air conditioning, strong internet access and is "worthy of them."

Adams said he believed the shift in school construction oversight was a "political decision" and he'd like to see that power moved back to the Board of Public Works. He said pushes by politicians, including at the Board of Public Works, to install air conditioning in public schools brought greater public visibility to important policy decisions.

Adams said he'd also support moving the newly established state Alcohol and Tobacco Commission back into the comptroller's office, while Lierman said she supported the creation of the separate entity, which was in line with best practices among state governments throughout the country.

"I think the only reason we should move an agency ... is if we can show it's a benefit to the citizens, to the taxpayers," Adams said. "I haven't seen anything that shows that there has been some kind of improvement by moving the alcohol and tobacco regulation from the controller's office."

Both candidates support the legalization of adult-use marijuana. Lierman would shift oversight to the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission, while Adams said he would prefer direct oversight.

Lierman endorsed

The forum was held Tuesday evening, hours after Lierman snagged an endorsement in Adams' backyard — from Bowie Mayor Pro Tem Adrian Boafo.

The endorsement was announced on social media Tuesday morning.

"Brooke is an effective leader who knows how to get things done and deliver for her constituents back home," Boafo, who is running for the House of Delegates in Prince George's County, said in a statement. "I have a unique insight into this race and Brooke is the candidate who has the experience and know-how to ensure every dollar makes its way back to the community in order to fund our public schools and support our small businesses. With Brooke, I know Prince George's County will always have a seat at the table."

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