

# Anne Arundel County Council passes fair housing bills, approves health officer nomination

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Nilesh Kalyanaraman, the nominated Anne Arundel County health officer, speaks with reporters and editors of The Capital to discuss his job and public health issues in the county. (Paul W. Gillespie/Capital Gazette)

Anne Arundel County Council passed two bills on fair housing at a meeting Tuesday night and voted to approve the nomination of Dr. Nilesh Kalyanaraman as the county's health officer, who still needs to be approved by Gov. Larry Hogan.

The two bills that were passed are part of County Executive Stuart Pittman's fair housing initiative.

The fair housing legislation, which passed with a 4-3 vote, will prevent discrimination in housing practices by protecting 17 classes and another bill provides the Human Relations Commission more power. Bill 55-19, prohibits discriminatory housing practices against people based on categories such as age, religion, race, sexual orientation and more. During previous meetings, the bill faced backlash from residents and some County Council members. Tuesday's meeting was the first after the summer recess.

Before the vote, council members Nathan Volke, R-Pasadena, Amanda Fiedler, R-Arnold, and Jessica Haire, R-Edgewater, shared why they would not vote for the legislation but pointed out that it was not because they do not support fair housing. For example, Volke said some of his concerns on definitions were either not fully defined or too loose. "I do have concerns about this bill but I hope that I am proven wrong," Volke said. "For these reasons, I will be voting no though I appreciate the discussion." Other concerns by Fiedler and Haire were on the category, occupation, and what it may mean for incentives when it comes to targeting police, firefighters, teachers and others within the workforce.

Councilwoman Sarah Lacey, D-Jessup, offered her support for the bill, as one of the sponsors, in particular to say thank you to the members of the public who came to multiple meetings. "I want to thank all of you who came and gave moving testimonies on why this bill is needed and long overdue. I appreciate your efforts," Lacey said.

The other legislation, Bill 57-19, created a new Human Relations Commission and human relations officer to review complaints of discrimination that have been established in the fair housing law. The bill, which passed with a 4-3 vote, would give the commission the power to

impose fines or penalties on property owners it finds discriminated against people seeking housing in the county; order landlords to sell or rent property to the complainant; order them to cease and desist from discrimination; or a combination of all.

The current chair of the commission, Michael Dye, explained that the bill is important to give the commission more authority. He gave an example, of harassment in which the case was dissolved before an agreement could be reached between the two parties. "Although we can provide mediation or write a strongly worded letter at some point we do not have teeth," Dye said. "We are looking for a change in the commission so it can address concerns."

In addition to this bill, another focused on workforce housing was passed in July after it sparked a debate between council members that led to members of the public asking for the council to work together despite differences in party or ideals.

The law allows incentives for workforce development and the expansion of zoning districts from two residential zones to nine in residential, commercial, industrial and mixed use.

Also at the meeting, Kalyanaraman's nomination was approved by the council to take charge of the Anne Arundel County Health Department. The final vote of approval is with Hogan. Kalyanaraman expects his first day to be Sept. 9. Before joining the county administration, he worked as chief medical officer for Health Care for the Homeless and he also ran for state delegate. Now, Kalyanaraman said he plans on focusing his efforts on challenges in the county such as gun violence, mental health and illnesses such as cardiovascular disease by working with communities. "We can make a difference in the lives of the residents of the county, by focusing on how we are engaging in our communities," Kalyanaraman said.

In particular, Kalyanaraman said that he has worked for 13 years in community health and would like to focus not simply on treating health conditions but getting ahead through preventive measures. For example, housing, transportation, income and education are also health indicators, he said. In addition, Kalyanaraman brought up data as a way to review health disparities in the county.

Before his nomination was approved, Volke asked about substance abuse and mental health, specifically Kalyanaraman's stance on programs like Not My Child, which is a prevention program for students focused on athletes who may need to take prescription medication for injuries. In response, Kalyanaraman said he would like to look into the comprehensive set of preventions and strategies currently used by the health department.