

Howard County Chamber of Commerce 2023 Business Outlook Address

Good Afternoon.

It's an honor and pleasure to be here with you today for this Business Outlook Luncheon. I want to start by thanking Leonardo and our panel for your insights and observations. The robust discussion is a testament to the time and preparation that was put into the panel.

While other counties struggle across our nation, our county builds momentum from our strength and stability as responsible stewards of our public dollars.

Earlier this month, we met with all three bond rating agencies and impressed the raters with our growth and progress. We are in the top 5 percent of counties in the nation that have earned a **AAA Bond Rating** because we have made strategic decisions to secure our present and future.

For the last four decades, we have been a Government Fiscal Officers Association winner. However, this year we were further honored with the new award for the **Popular Annual Financial Report (PAFR)** for our work in Fiscal Year 2021.

This award highlights our transparency and leadership in financial reporting. The new reporting standard highlights our ability to change and move with information that is accessible to all. ***That's Momentum!***

Columbia has consistently been named one of the best cities for jobs. We are fortunate to be a place where businesses choose to grow and expand. Last year, 17 of the **INC 5000 Fastest Growing Companies** called Howard County home.

We remain a model of strong and efficient government operations. In just four years, we received a record **81** awards for our innovation from the National Association of Counties. We are one of the top five in the nation for the number of awards. These awards reflect the intentional and strategic momentum.

Together, we will continue to be the best place to live, work, play, and grow for all.

With Bold action, we are protecting our environment for future generations. In July 2021, we signed the largest power purchasing agreement in the State.

Today, many of those projects are now complete. When you arrive at the Kenneth S. Ulman Innovation Hub, you will park under our new solar panels. We have extensive rooftop solar. This is visible proof of our commitment to combat climate change.

Just this last October, I signed an Executive Order to reach new climate goals. We will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 percent by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2045.

Also, in October, we were honored to welcome Senator Ben Cardin to celebrate Howard County's designation as the **first County in**

the country to achieve LEED Platinum Certification under this current version.

This achievement signals a shift in how the County operates and leads the State of Maryland into a Greener future. **That's Momentum!**

Howard County must keep our positive momentum, especially as the premiere destination for businesses to launch and expand. We are also a place for business to expand. We continue to see the advancement of our businesses through innovative programs, such our often-replicated HoCo Higher Program, which we have operated since 2021 in Partnership with M & T Bank.

Jim Peterson and the team at M & T assist entrepreneurs, especially those who are traditionally underserved, access important resources and support.

Our HoCo Higher initiative provides seed money for small businesses to grow and find their momentum. So far, we have funded more than **\$300,000** in grants and have been a leader in our region with its active cohorts and funding provided.

So far, over **60** businesses have completed the HoCo Higher program.

HoCo Higher has supported many of the businesses that we know and love, including:

Tocar Spa – Stephen Conti has created a boutique experience that offers his clients a myriad of massage and personal care

services. He worked hard to open his location and has grown his company to seven employees.

AppleCore Bakeshop– **Ayesha Applewhyte's** home business has found its first location in the newly opened headquarters of The 3rd. If you haven't tried her baked goods, I encourage you to stop by or order online. Ayesha has grown from a HoCo Higher startup grantee to a local brand and staple.

And finally – **GrillMarx** – A woman-owned venture offering tasty steaks and more was part of our recent cohort. Their location in Downtown Columbia, is a welcome addition to our thriving culinary scene and I commend **Jackie Baker Ness** for the work that she has done to get her business off the ground in Howard County.

The response to our HoCo Higher initiative has been overwhelming. We need to keep this **momentum** going for our community. It is fueling so many new ideas and outstanding enterprises.

Today, I am excited to announce that we will now recruit a fourth cohort of HoCo Higher entrepreneurs, which will start on April 19th.

My belief is that county goods and services should come from our community members.

In 2018, there were **100** firms certified in our Local Business Initiative with the County's Office of Procurement and Contract Administration. These contracts comprised a total spending of about **\$4 million**.

As of last month, we have grown to over **350** firms, with nearly **\$16** million spent to date with our certified local businesses. Our efforts to increase spending with our local businesses have been a significant hallmark of my time in office.

This momentum has attracted local businesses and diverse contractors to significant projects that are moving us forward.

That is why we contracted with Complete Paving Experts in Jessup, which is an LBI and specializes in road resurfacing projects. Our new contract with this firm kept over **\$4 million** in our county.

We also contracted with HCGI HARTFORD which is a locally headquartered woman-owned enterprise. They've been working with us on two Audio Visual projects totaling over **\$200,000**.

That's money we're keeping here to energize our economy.

I remain committed to a Howard County that benefits all and I have been fervent in my belief that we must improve our purchasing and diversity practices by becoming a national model.

During the first two quarters this fiscal year, we have done over **\$30 million** worth of business with minority, women-owned and disabled-owned business enterprises. This includes direct purchases and subcontracting arrangements and represents **20 percent** of all purchasing. Now that's **Momentum! but, we must do more**

That's why on **April 6**, we will hold an event where companies will meet our prime contractors, county agencies, and have access to

state and local resources. All in order to support and further small businesses growth. I encourage you to look out for more information, as I know you will not want to miss it.

The force that helps drive our economic momentum is fueled in part by our partnership with Howard County's Economic Development Authority, Visit Howard County, the Chambers of Commerce, and our state partners. We open the doors of opportunity for all.

Together, we have seen growth in a variety of ways, including:

The pandemic presented challenges to the hospitality industry, but we have seen an over 70 percent increase in post-pandemic spending in Winter 2022 in our local hospitality establishments.

On the healthcare front... **Ascension Saint Agnes** has invested \$45 million in office space and added **60** jobs to the existing **145** in the county. At the same time, **CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield** is leasing an additional **80,000 square feet of office space** in Downtown Columbia's Merriweather District, expanding its presence in the region.

InFarm, which is the World's largest vertical grower, will convert a large warehouse space in Columbia Gateway into a manufacturing facility. InFarm plans more than **\$60 million** of investment into its **184,000 square feet**. The operation will employ at least **70 people**.

Holdings Management Company, which is a woman-owned furniture and fixture manufacturer, expanded in Howard County. The company now occupies **33,000 square feet** and employs **35 individuals**.

Aya Center LLC Montessori has helped expand the county's childcare supply to address this important workforce issue. This expansion added **15,000 square feet**, with a capital investment of more than **\$3 million** and the school added **10 employees**.

Larry Twele, thank you and your team for your professionalism and expertise. The level of programming and support that you provide to the business community is invaluable.

Amanda Hof, I appreciate you and your dogged efforts in support of our hospitality industry through Visit Howard County. Your work has kept many of these businesses going through adverse times.

Leonardo McClarty at the Howard County Chamber & Kristi Simon at the Central Maryland Chamber, thank you for your innovative programming and engagement with the business community. Events like this are pivotal in driving our momentum forward.

We know that businesses are not built over night. They require hard work and determination to bring an idea to fruition and grow it to prosperity.

That is why we are continuing our efforts to assist emerging businesses through Howard County's Catalyst Loan and our Collateral Funds. These programs provide increased access to capital and help bridge funding gaps. Since 2020, we approved **25** catalyst loans totaling over **\$5 million**, impacting more than **300 jobs**. ***That is Momentum!***

Our local entrepreneurs are bringing fresh ideas and energy to our community, and we are here to support them at every step of their journey.

During the pandemic, EDA started the BRITE Program which was designed to assist early stage businesses with coaching and mentoring services. So far, the program has served over **160** start-ups and nearly **225** entrepreneurs completed classes at the Kenneth S. Ulman Innovation Hub. That is powerful progress.

Some of their offerings include Building Social Capital, Exceeding Sales, Design Thinking, Digital Marketing and more. The Program's Entrepreneurs in Residence provide support from veteran business owners who bring insight and offer solutions to early-stage enterprises on issues ranging from branding to legal advice.

The BRITE Program has hosted four Pitch competitions that have awarded over **\$30,000** to **20** start-up firms. These "shark-tank" competitions prepare participants for other venture capital funding opportunities that are vital to their success.

I wanted to highlight the efforts of **Edward DeJesus**, who has been an active participant and Entrepreneur In Residence to the BRITE program.

Ed, who is here in the audience, is the CEO of **Social Capital Builders**, which brings awareness of this overlooked asset to youth workforce programs and has now expanded it to adults, entrepreneurs, and returning citizens.

In just four years, his success has been recognized with a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He will partner with the Skill Up Coalition to create a pilot to enhance economic mobility for low-wage adult job seekers in Howard County and across the U.S.

Thank you, Ed, for your hard work and all you do. Ed's story is another example of the energy and momentum that sustain long-lasting social change.

Through our collaborative efforts, we are THE place where businesses want to grow and thrive, and it is safe to say that the State of Howard County's Business is STRONG!

I'm optimistic about the future of Howard County. We have the right mix of resources, location, and educated workforce that maintains us as a county in perpetual forward motion.

We project that in the next 20 years, **nearly 60,000 jobs** will be added here--from our rich agriculture and farms, to Columbia, the Route 1 corridor, Downtown Ellicott City, and every other corner of our great county.

There is no doubt that Howard County is the high-octane economic engine for Maryland and the mid-Atlantic.

That's why our job growth – at **13.5 percent** – is nearly three times the state average.

That's why we continue to be named and cited as best for all phases of life.

That's why we have one of the best educated populations and highest concentration of wealth in the state.

We persevere and power forward with a robust economy that excels even in the face of unprecedented challenges, and we will continue to do so.

We are relentless, and our potential is unlimited.

We will reach even higher by leveraging our resources, removing barriers, creating opportunities, and making our government more responsive and resilient.

As you leave this room, I ask you to consider a quote from entrepreneur and success thought leader **Farshad Asl** who said, "It takes a leader to create the momentum, it takes a vision to direct the momentum, it takes a massive action to build on the momentum, and it takes self-discipline to sustain the momentum."

I look out in the audience and see the finest business and governmental leaders in Maryland.

There is no force in Howard County stronger than its people. Your actions and investments, hard-work and grit are propelling this County forward to keep our momentum.

You are that fuel for the future.

You are moving us forward, and I am proud to be your County Executive. **Thank you.**