



# MARYLAND MATTERS

## **Political Notes: MACo crab feast, a new gig for Ben Smith, road tripping, and the governor coming to GOP's dinner**

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How do you press the flesh at an event where all the participants have Old Bay on their hands?

That's the question candidates and officials faced at the Maryland Association of Counties' Friday night crab feast in Ocean City. With at least 2,000 attendees, it's a target-rich environment for glad-handing politicians. But the question is, how and when do you stick out your hand?

Many of the pols seem to have figured it out. With the eaters jammed together at tables under two circus tents, the candidates and statewide leaders have figured out how to circle the area without getting their hands dirty.

"You just work the perimeter and see if there's anyone you know," said Del. Brooke Lierman, the Democratic nominee for state comptroller.

Now in his eighth year in office, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) seems to have figured a few things out. He knows to come early, before too many people have eaten. Dozens of attendees stream out of the tents to say hello, and Hogan obligingly poses for pictures.



*Del. Brooke Lierman (D-Baltimore City), chats with Walter Olson (center), who headed Gov. Larry Hogan's redistricting reform efforts, and Chris Shank, a top Hogan adviser, at the Maryland Association of Counties crab feast Friday. Photo by Josh Kurtz.*

Wes Moore, the Democratic nominee for governor, arrived a little later. But he said one of the advantages of being at MACo all week, and attending events both inside and outside the Roland Powell Convention Center, was that he had already met a number of people who were at the crab feast.

“I think there are a lot of people whose hands I’ve already touched,” he said. “I’m really looking forward to getting my hands in some crabs.”

It’s possible, though, that Moore went hungry. He was still making the rounds when we departed the parking lot where the crab feast was taking place, moving in and out of the tents, posing for pictures and accepting hugs.

### **Pittman’s hire**

Ben Smith, a veteran Democratic activist and strategist who recently helmed Comptroller Peter Franchot’s unsuccessful Democratic primary bid for governor, has signed on as campaign manager for Anne Arundel County Steuart Pittman (D), who faces a tough reelection battle against County Councilmember Jessica Haire (R).

Pittman and Smith already have a business relationship. Smith, the former executive director of the Maryland Democratic Party, serves as a senior adviser to [Future Matters](#), a 501c4 organization that Pittman set up in the fall of 2020.

“We’ve got the best in the state,” Pittman said of Smith. “I have a lot of respect for his work. He wasn’t available when we got [the campaign] started, and he’s available now.”

Smith said Pittman has “a good record to run on,” and both men said Pittman’s political standing in a swing county is stronger than it was just a few months ago. Haire emerged from a bruising five-way Republican primary, and the GOP has yet to fully unify. Pittman also said that Haire’s promise to rein in county spending will fall flat in the general election.

“She says she wants to shrink government,” Pitman said. “Attacking local government I don’t think is a winning message.”

### **A Noem-coming**

The Maryland Republican Party announced this week that South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a possible presidential contender in 2024, will headline the state GOP’s annual “Red, White and Blue” dinner on Sept. 22 at the Hotel at UMD in College Park.

Throughout this week’s MACo conference in Ocean City, there has been much chatter about the type of Republican who can succeed politically in Maryland, as the popular Hogan makes his valedictory appearances. Noem represents the Trumpier, more extreme element of the GOP, though her appearance and message are sure to enrapture many conservative activists.

“Governor Noem believes that America is a better place when the economy is strong, when government is limited, and when people are free to exercise their God-given rights,” Maryland Republican Chair Dirk Haire — Jessica Haire’s husband — wrote in an email solicitation for the event. “Governor Noem fought against federal tax increases, and she is fiercely protective of preserving a system of no state income tax. She’s a staunch supporter of the Second Amendment and is steadfast in maintaining Constitutional carry rights. She’s unwavering in her commitment to personal freedom and will always fight government intrusion.

“We can’t wait to welcome Governor Noem to Maryland for our biggest event of the year. I personally look forward to hearing her share her experience in fighting for South Dakotans’ individual liberties as the federal government tried to impose hysterical Covid restrictions.”

Not sure what Hogan would think. But then he’s skipped the last few state GOP dinners.

### **‘Thug alley’ at MACo**

As usual this year, there were hundreds of booths in the exhibition hall at the Maryland Association of Counties summer conference in Ocean City, peddling everything from the military to government agencies to energy companies to health care providers to academic institutions and everything in between.



*A scene from “thug alley” in the Ocean City convention center: U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) flanked by Donna Edwards and Gerald Jackson, the president and secretary-treasurer, respectively, of the state AFL-CIO. Photo by Josh Kurtz.*

This year, four labor organizations set up shop in the exhibition hall, grouped together near the back: The Maryland State and D.C. AFL-CIO, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 24, AFSCME Council 3, and the Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 486. It was the first time in memory that so many unions were on hand, and their proximity was noteworthy.

“Thug alley,” Chuck Cook, the AFL-CIO political director, called it — a humorous reference to the way union leaders are often characterized by their critics (including Hogan).

Like every other group giving out swag, the unions had candy, pens, pencils and other stuff, including an AFL-CIO glasses wipe and several decorative pins from the IBEW. One contained the name of Mike McHale, the business manager of the union.

“It’s not my ego, it’s someone else’s idea,” he insisted with a laugh.

### **Road trip**

Del. Robbyn Lewis (D-Baltimore City) has served in the General Assembly for five years, but made her first visit to the MACo summer convention this week.

“I didn’t even know we could go,” she said, somewhat sheepishly.

Lewis is famous for being the only member of the General Assembly who doesn’t own a car. During legislative sessions, she generally takes an Uber from her home to Annapolis at the beginning of the week, and takes another one back at week’s end. So we wondered how she got to Ocean City.

Turns out, she hitched a ride with a colleague, Del. Jessica Feldmark (D-Howard) and Feldmark's husband, Joshua Feldmark, director of community sustainability for Howard County. But because she was leaving a day earlier than the Feldmarks, she had to take a costly shuttle back to Baltimore from the OC. Price tag: \$120 one-way.

Lewis said that circumstance is a reminder of how Maryland's transportation favors car owners and discriminates against those who can't afford their own vehicle (Lewis foregoes a car by choice).

"There is no way for the average Marylander to come to the beach, a public beach, and enjoy all of Maryland's natural treasures if you don't have access to a car," she said.