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Mat Weinstein's Presses Lawmakers

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What is Progressive Maryland?

It's a non-profit coalition with about 15,000 individual members and nearly 50 organizational affiliates, including labor, civil rights and religious advocacy groups. Our two Jewish affiliates are the Mid-Atlantic Region of Union for Reform Judaism and the Maryland chapter of the American Jewish Congress.

We focus on improving the standard of living for the average, middle-class person. Specifically, we fought for higher minimum wages [in Maryland]. We led the fight in last fall's General Assembly special session for new revenue for state government, to protect our investment in education, health care and the Chesapeake Bay. We fought to make sure the tax increases were fair. We successfully led the fight for the 'millionaire' tax, for increasing corporate taxes and for closing corporate tax loopholes.

What led to this career?

To some extent, I can credit my upbringing in the local community. My family were members of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation; I attended Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School. It was stressed that we are committed and responsible for playing our part to have a strong, cohesive, successful Jewish community and at the same time, a responsibility for the general community.

Are you in Annapolis a lot?

Most days I am. The last couple of General Assembly sessions, my focus has been on campaign finance reform and the need for public funding so legislators won't be dependent on private campaign contributions. The Baltimore Jewish Council [an agency of the Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore] has long supported this campaign on our part.

How does the public perceive advocacy groups in general and Progressive Maryland specifically?

It depends if people think you are fighting for them. We have a door-to-door canvassing operation and the public is delighted to hear that someone is fighting for them. It's not just the big-money lobbyists running the show in Annapolis.

Do the big-money lobbyists run Annapolis?

Sometimes they do. Too many times they do. We're hopeful that campaign reform legislation will reduce their influence, as it has done in the states where it's been enacted. This will be especially an issue going forward in health care. That's our next focus — guaranteed, affordable, high-quality health care for all Marylanders. It's coming up in the General Assembly. We're working with Maryland Citizens Health Initiatives, a statewide coalition, on that.

How does Progressive Maryland rate the state?

Maryland has a reputation as a liberal state, but one thing we learned in the debate over taxes and budget last year is that Maryland ranks near the bottom of all states in the percent of income we spend on local and state government.

So we're not as progressive as we think. It's good we have a leader like Gov. [Martin] O'Malley, who is willing to challenge us and to call us to keep our promise [on education, health care and the bay]. We are optimistic that Maryland is moving forward.

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