Governor Larry Hogan's 2020 State of the State Address: The People's Priorities

My fellow Marylanders:

As we come together once again for this time-honored tradition, it is my distinct privilege to be the first Maryland governor to begin a State of the State address by saying: Madam Speaker.

Mr. President, members of the General Assembly, and distinguished guests:

It speaks to the greatness and diversity of our state and to the progress that we have made together that a young lawyer from Baltimore City, an African American leader from Baltimore County, and a Republican businessman from Prince George's are all here before this General Assembly, having been chosen to lead our great state at the dawn of this new decade.

And this is possible because of those who came before us—selfless leaders like George Washington, who resigned his commission as commander of the Continental Forces just a few steps down the hall in our Old Senate Chamber; Francis Scott Key, who, when the future of a fledgling nation was in doubt, penned the words that continue to inspire us today; and trailblazers like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, statues of whom we will be dedicating next week in our Old House Chamber—leaders who displayed such courage and sacrifice in the name of freedom.

We have been fortunate to follow the example of influential leaders in our lifetime, too. Last year, we lost Speaker Mike Busch, who dedicated the greater part of his life in service to our state, and who left Maryland a better place than he found it.

And Thomas V. "Mike" Miller, Jr., who, after serving as Senate President longer than anyone in American history is now beginning his fiftieth year of public service as Senate President Emeritus. During his recent battles, Mike Miller has shown us all the true meaning of courage and determination.

As we gather here once again in this historic place to take the first steps of this new decade, we do so with optimism and confidence in our collective ability to continue changing Maryland for the better.

Sadly, the country that we all love is increasingly divided by toxic politics. But here in Maryland, we have spent these past five years working together to tackle our common problems by accepting our shared responsibility to solve them.

Five years ago, during my first Inaugural Address, I said that the politics that have divided our nation need not divide our state, and I asked all Marylanders to seek that middle ground where we could all stand together. And while Washington seems to be more bitterly divided than ever, here in Maryland we have faced our challenges with civility and moderation. We have continued to put the people's priorities ahead of partisan politics, and we worked together to achieve real, bipartisan, common sense solutions that worked for the people we serve.

As a result, I am pleased to report that the state of our state has never been stronger.

The people of Maryland, regardless of their party affiliation, are overwhelmingly pleased with the job that we have been doing.

Maryland has indeed been setting a shining example for the rest of America.

And as we embrace the promise of this new decade, we have a renewed opportunity to meet the challenges that lie ahead by continuing on that path and by being accountable to the people who sent us here.

Five years ago, I pledged to put more people to work to grow the private sector and to turn Maryland's economy around. And we have done exactly what we said we would do.

More businesses are now open and more people are working than ever before in the history of our state. We ushered in the largest decline in unemployment ever recorded and had one of the greatest economic turnarounds in America.

But there is one part of our economy that I can't fix without your help.

Nearly every day, I hear from folks who say, "I love the State of Maryland. I've spent my whole life here, and I don't want to leave my kids and grandkids, but I just can't afford to stay here on a fixed income."

We are losing many of our best citizens. People who have contributed so much and who still have more to offer are moving to other states for one reason: our state's sky-high retirement taxes. They tell me that Maryland's retirement taxes are simply too high, and that they are moving to Delaware, Florida, the Carolinas, or any other state where they don't take so much out of their retirement checks.

So we proposed the "Retirement Tax Reduction Act of 2020," which will provide more than $1 billion in tax relief over five years.

Under this plan, retirees making $50,000 or less, who are often forced to make tough choices every single day just to make ends meet, will pay no state income tax whatsoever. And all

retirees earning less than $100,000 will see a tax reduction of no less than 50% and up to 100%.

This is the largest tax reduction in Maryland in more than two decades. It will provide tax relief for more than 230,000 Marylanders and will help keep tens of thousands of Maryland retirees from fleeing our state.

We have some of the best and most highly funded schools in America, and we have provided record funding six years in a row, committing nearly $40 billion to K-12 education.

We enacted the Casino Lockbox Initiative, which will require the investment of an additional $4.4 billion more into our local school systems for critical things like increasing teacher salaries, Pre-K expansion, extended academic programming for at-risk students, and innovative career technology programs. And we invested $350 million more in our FY 2021 budget to fully fund the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission without raising taxes.

More than 75% of our entire capital budget goes toward education. No governor in the history of this state has ever invested more in education.

And you can help us build on that historic investment by passing our “Building Opportunity Act of 2020," that will provide a record $3.9 billion in funding, the largest investment ever in school construction, which will enable us to fulfill every single request from every single jurisdiction in the state for new school construction and for upgrades and repairs to aging schools.

I stand here today ready and willing to continue working alongside you to ensure that every single child in our state has access to a great education, regardless of what neighborhood they happen to grow up in.

But instead of continuing to simply debate how much more we should spend, let’s have productive discussions about how we can hold local school systems accountable for the billions of state tax dollars we are already investing, and let’s make sure those dollars are getting into the classrooms where they belong.

Our bipartisan efforts should have one simple goal, and that is achieving better results for Maryland’s children.

We have taken a balanced, all-inclusive approach to infrastructure, investing $14 billion in transit—the most ever—and beginning construction on the Purple Line, which is the largest P3 transit project in North America.

We proposed and negotiated a regional solution to address WMATA’s half-billion-dollar-a-year shortfall in order to save the Metro system.

After decades of discussion, we negotiated a deal to finally move forward with the Howard Street Tunnel, which will break a major East Coast rail transport bottleneck, allowing for double-stacked trains, which will dramatically increase production at the Port of Baltimore and create thousands of Maryland jobs.

We have moved forward on nearly all of the highest priority transportation projects in every single jurisdiction all across our state. Over 800 projects totaling $9 billion in roads and bridges are currently under construction.

We advanced a transformative regional interstate traffic relief plan, which will finally begin to address the second-worst traffic congestion in America and solve what has been the number one problem in the region for decades, and as chairman of the nation's governors, I'm leading a national initiative focused on rebuilding America's crumbling infrastructure.

We pushed for landmark legislation which cemented our position as a national and international leader in combating greenhouse gas emissions, and implemented clean air standards which are stronger than 48 other states and nearly twice as strong as the Paris Accord recommendations.

When it comes to the Chesapeake Bay, we committed $6 billion—the most ever in history—to clean up the Bay. And as chairman of the six-state regional commission, the Chesapeake Executive Council, I stood up and led the fight to protect and restore federal funding for the Chesapeake Bay.

And we are pushing for action to hold the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the EPA accountable for the pollution coming down the Susquehanna River, over the Conowingo Dam, and into the Bay. Maryland has made historic progress in Bay restoration, but we cannot, and should not, have to do it alone. I intend to keep pushing our upstream neighbors and federal partners to ensure that they are doing their fair share to protect this national treasure.

To ensure that public officials are worthy of the trust that the people have placed in them, we introduced the "Ethics and Accountability in Government Act," to strengthen and toughen state ethics laws. This is an important effort to help restore the public's trust and to bring further transparency and accountability to Annapolis. We cannot allow the unethical behavior of a few to tarnish the goodwill of the many in our state capital.

While Maryland is leading the way and setting an example in so many ways, there is one area where we continue to be on the wrong side of history. Our state has the unfortunate distinction of having the most gerrymandered districts in America.

For five years in a row, we have introduced nonpartisan redistricting reform, and yet year after year this body has refused to even debate the legislation. We serve in the nation's oldest state house that once served as the first capitol of the United States after the Revolutionary War.

American democracy literally began right here in this very place. And yet when it comes to free and fair elections, we are failing to live up to that proud legacy.

This General Assembly should not continue to ignore the will of the overwhelming majority of our citizens.

In this highly partisan time in America, you have a chance to do the right thing. To strike a win for democracy, fairness, and decency by finally, after five years, bringing the nonpartisan redistricting bill to the floor of this body for an up or down vote.

Every issue I have talked about here today, and all of the bills you will be considering over the next 61 days, are important and worthy of debate and discussion. But none of them are nearly as important as addressing the out-of-control violent crime, the shootings, and murders that are destroying Baltimore City.

In October, a two-year-old boy was riding in the car with his family on a Saturday morning when he was shot in the stomach. Last month, a 73-year-old grandmother was shot and killed after being caught in gang crossfire near the apartment complex where she lived. Twelve people were recently shot, and five people were killed, in just one night. More than 1,000 people were shot on the streets of Baltimore City last year. 348 people were killed. Another 60 people have been shot, and 23 people killed, just in the 29 days since this legislative session began.

One concerned Baltimore City resident recently said of the violence: “I don’t know if prayers help, but we need prayers.”

I'm a big believer in the power of prayer. And yes, we do need prayers, but prayers are not enough. We are also going to need you to take action to get these shooters off our streets.

If you do not consider any other legislation, and if you accomplish nothing else in the next 61 days, pass the “Violent Firearm Offenders Act of 2020,” which increases penalties for those who use guns to commit violent crimes, toughens penalties for those who possess stolen firearms and guns with obliterated serial numbers, and those who use, possess, or supply illegal guns to violent criminals.

And pass the “Witness Intimidation Prevention Act,” which toughens penalties for those who intimidate and threaten witnesses.

And the “Judicial Transparency Act,” because the public also has a right to know about the sentences judges are giving to the most violent offenders. We have been fighting to bring more transparency and accountability to the executive and legislative branches. There is no reason why the judicial branch can’t be held accountable as well.

People are being shot every single day in Baltimore City. This is an urgent crisis, and we have an obligation to do something about it right now. There can be no more excuses and no more delays.

The time has come for Baltimore City to finally take back its streets and communities, once and for all. And they simply cannot do it without decisive action from this General Assembly.

I recently had the chance to visit UMAR Boxing in West Baltimore, where Maryland Hall of Fame boxer Marvin McDowell trains and mentors local kids. He is not just teaching them boxing skills and discipline—he's also teaching them life skills and giving them hope. His motto is "No Hooks Before Books." And I met just as many kids who were there studying as there were boxing.

Marvin is fighting every day to save young people and the city that he loves. Marvin said, "If everybody had the same attitude I had, of hope, then that would be a change."

We are honored to have Marvin McDowell here with us this afternoon. Thank you, Marvin, for making a difference.

And Marvin is absolutely right. If we could all start from a place of hope and optimism, and if we could all find the will and the determination to come together, to take on even the most daunting challenges, then we can bring about change in Baltimore City, and we will continue to change Maryland for the better.

Ladies and gentlemen, our nation appears hopelessly and bitterly divided. Just 30 miles down the road in Washington, both parties seem to be consumed with partisanship and dysfunction.

But as I look back at all that we have been through and all the progress that we have made together here in Maryland over these last five years, my experiences do not burden me with dread—they fill me with hope. And I believe that in spite of all that divides us in America today, there is far more that unites us.

And as America searches for healing and a path forward, let them look to us. Because from the very founding of our nation, Maryland has always been guided by our commitment to fairness and justice, and by a conviction that no problem faces us that hard work, honesty, and courage cannot solve if we work together.

And so today, with confidence in the inherent wisdom and good judgment of the people of Maryland and the people of our nation, I ask you, my partners in this legislature on both sides of the aisle, to continue forward with me on this path.

Let us continue to deliver real results for the people who put their trust in us. Let us keep putting the people's priorities before partisan interests.

Let’s keep changing Maryland for the better and continue setting an example for the rest of the nation.

Thank you.

May God bless the great State of Maryland, and the United States of America.