

New NAIOP president warns developers of 'shifting' political winds

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The new head of an influential commercial real estate group says he plans to aggressively lobby suburban leaders and the General Assembly to include the industry in upcoming zoning changes, legislation and development moratorium debates.

James Lighthizer, principal of Chesapeake Real Estate Group, said in his first interview as president of NAIOP Maryland that he will embark on a mission to raise the bar for future development projects.

His perspectives surfaced on Dec. 13 during the annual NAIOP holiday luncheon, which focused on raising awareness that changes in the Maryland House of Delegates and Senate leadership could lessen development opportunities for commercial and industrial projects. The luncheon also addressed movements in some suburban counties toward residential and industrial building moratoriums, as well as new zoning laws to promote conservation and land preservation.

Lighthizer, whose family has long been involved in politics, said his approach as head of NAIOP will be rooted in politics and tinged with his trademark moxie that has helped attract Amazon, Under Armour and Best Buy, to name a few, to open large warehouse operations in his suburban industrial parks.

"The winds are shifting and a storm is coming," Lighthizer told the 450 members of NAIOP during the holiday gathering at the Marriott Waterfront Hotel. "Many of the new players in the Maryland legislature and county government bring progressive liberal political perspectives to government. Many of these perspectives do not align with the interests of our business and real estate community."

Lighthizer said he plans to immediately begin lobbying state and suburban leaders about the impact of commercial development on the state's economy and NAIOP's role in helping to foster more commercial projects. The group has a full-time lobbyist in Annapolis and several committees as support, he said.



LARRY LICHTENAUER

Lighthizer just took the helm as president of NAIOP Maryland chapter. He is also a principal in Chesapeake Real Estate.

"The roles and responsibilities of our NAIOP organization have to continue to change," Lighthizer said during a wide-ranging interview with the Business Journal after the luncheon. "The political environment in Maryland is changing fast. Thinking otherwise is unrealistic. This will force us to look at and respond to things differently, starting immediately. 'Same old' probably isn't going to work anymore and we cannot expect it to."

Part of that effort is to push out NAIOP's message online as part of a new communications strategy to "hammer home" the shift.

"I think we're losing the PR campaign. Every day you read about how development is bad for a economy, education and traffic," he said. "But the fact is businesses want new homes and new space and we're in a growing economy and people need space. If you don't grow, you die. You have to have smart growth, but don't get me wrong, you do need to have reasonable growth. Projects that people want to spend time at and want to shop, work and live."

There could be some pushback. A major flashpoint is already brewing in Anne Arundel County, Lighthizer said.

The county — once run by his father, O. James Lighthizer, who was county executive from 1982 to 1990 — is in the process of instituting a new zoning agenda amid a public debate over a new development plan that could limit certain permits.

Some of the focus will be to steer development to targeted growth areas and leave rural areas pristine. But that could limit possibilities for industrial growth, Lighthizer said.

"They are killing the industry," Lighthizer said of Anne Arundel County, where Chesapeake Real Estate has successful industrial hubs at Brandon Woods in Curtis Bay. A 340,000-square-foot warehouse was added this year to a growing complex there.

Not so, said Anne Arundel County Executive Steuart Pittman.

Pittman, a progressive Democrat who took office last year, said in response to Lighthizer's comments that he understood his frustration. But Pittman said the county's development code was outdated and in need of an update that will be debated in the coming year before a vote in late 2020 by the County Council.

"I do think it is a rough time to be a developer," said Pittman, a farmer from Davidsonville. "I'm sympathetic. They have a seat at the table, but they might not have as many seats as they once had. What I have told them as well as the homebuilders and others is that I believe within a couple of years they will appreciate the direction we've taken."

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