Dear Readers:

Welcome to the inaugural issue of “Common Sense: Straight Talk for the Eastern Shore”. It is the result of a number of Kent County residents growing tired of receiving spin, exaggeration and plain lies posing as dependable information.

In response, we have joined together to publish a newsletter that provides brief, factual articles about current events - especially decisions in Washington, Annapolis, corporate headquarters and elsewhere - and how they will or could affect those of us living in Maryland’s nine Eastern Shore counties.

Common Sense will be available online (every other Wednesday) on our website: http://www.CommonSenseEasternShore.org. Additionally, a printable pdf version will be available under the Newsletter Archive menu. We also give permission for any Eastern Shore organization to share Common Sense with its members, either online or in print, as long as it is unaltered and with proper credit.

We welcome feedback as well as suggestions of topics to cover or draft articles that you submit. Kent County we know first-hand; we look forward to expanding our knowledge of the eight other counties. We need your input: tell us what’s going on and what issues or problems there are in your neck-of-the-woods, or pose questions you would like us to investigate.

Looking forward to a productive exchange for the good of the Shore!

The Editors and Staff of
Common Sense: Straight Talk for the Eastern Shore
Contact us at info@CommonSenseEasternShore.org
Hurricane Harvey and the Eastern Shore: Could It Happen Here?

The pictures from Texas were stunning. The storm dropped more than 4 feet of rain, flooded hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses, and is estimated to have caused as much as $190 billion in damage. Most of the affected properties were not covered by flood insurance. And now Irma in Florida.

Could it happen here? Hurricane Isabel (2003), far smaller than Harvey, brought a storm surge that reached up to 8 feet on the Chesapeake Bay and caused $500 million in damage. And according to a detailed recent survey, about 21,000 people on Maryland’s Eastern Shore live less than 6 feet above high tide. A direct hit from a storm like Harvey—with torrential rain and storm surges—would affect far more people.

Was Harvey’s devastating power caused by a warming climate? Not directly, but a warming ocean does produce more moisture in the atmosphere—which is the fuel that drives a hurricane and which also contributes to its intense rainfall. Climate scientists say that we should expect more frequent intense storms such as Harvey and Irma.

Even more important and inexorable is the rise in sea levels. Along Maryland’s coastline, the sea level has risen about a foot over the last century, mostly because of land subsidence. But a warming climate is already causing the melting of glaciers and the polar ice caps, and is expected to raise sea levels as much as 20 feet over the next two centuries. And as seas rise, flooding and storm surges reach still higher ground.

So yes, it could happen here—Sandy was a near miss, hitting New Jersey and New York instead of us. Extreme weather is now happening all over the USA and the world. We have a direct stake in climate change, and in efforts to prevent it. Moreover, the President has proposed to cut funding for FEMA, the disaster relief agency, and for the flood insurance program—which, if Congress goes along, would leave the Eastern Shore even more vulnerable. Maybe we should demand that our elected public officials take climate change more seriously and support efforts to slow it, or at least prepare for the consequences better than we have so far.

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How to Train for a Job on the Eastern Shore Career/Technical Education (CTE)

Do you need a college degree to get a good job? The facts say no. Nationally, 39% of jobs in 2013 required only a high school degree; 27% less than a high school diploma. In Maryland, one of the states with the largest number of occupations that typically require a college degree, only 27% of all jobs needed one. For most local jobs, a high school career/technical diploma can be all you need.

Young people on the Eastern Shore have good access to such training. All nine counties offer career/technical training in a wide variety of vocational fields. In Kent County, for example, there are classes in Agricultural Sciences, Automotive Technology, Broadcasting, Construction Trades, Culinary Arts, Fire and Rescue, Introduction to Engineering, and Nursing. Cecil County, offers training in 21 different fields—including Cosmetology (2015 data). Queen Anne’s courses include Biomedical Sciences and Information Technology. Wicomico County offers the most choice—26 different specialties. The number of students enrolled in career/technical courses varies quite a bit too—41% to 50% of all students in Cecil County; less than 40% in Kent County; only 21% to 30% in Wicomico.

Most students in career/technical courses succeed, making them a good springboard to jobs, careers, or higher education. In 2014-2015, there were 95,991 Maryland high school students in these programs and 99% graduated. In Kent County 75% of the graduates in these programs found employment, joined the military, or entered college. For those who choose to pursue career/technical education beyond high school, the Eastern Shore also offers good local opportunities. There are three community colleges on the Peninsula: Cecil College in North East; Chesapeake College at Wye Mills; and Wor-Wic Community College in Salisbury, all of which offer classes in virtually every vocational field.

The evidence suggests strongly that a college degree is not necessary for good employment. Nonetheless, that belief persists. In 2014-2015, 83% of Maryland high school students planned to attend college, while only 11% intended to enter the work force immediately. A mere 3% planned on joining the military. Yet there are hundreds of thousands of unfilled positions in Maryland alone for technical
careers in fields ranging from cyber security to smart home services to wind turbine maintenance. It might be worth taking a closer look.

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The Potential Price of Political Gridlock

If the Congress doesn’t pass a budget by the end of September, then by law, the U.S. government can’t spend money, and will shut down. That means federal offices and parks will be closed, and no benefit checks will be mailed. Most Federal employees will be furloughed and not be paid for however long the government is shut, even though they will be reimbursed later. Worst hit will be Federal contractors, who will lose outright the revenue they would have earned.

Maryland will be hit especially hard, because it has the 2nd highest number of Federal employees and the highest number of Federal contracts, per capita, in the country. That means less tax money to fund state services like education and healthcare.

But a government shutdown is likely not the most serious problem that could arise. Congress also has to pass legislation to raise the debt ceiling, and the President has to sign it—and he has threatened not to. That would be potentially catastrophic, because the government in recent decades has always run a deficit, and has simply borrowed the additional money it needs. But it can’t, by law, borrow more than a limit set by Congress, and usually raised each year. If it is not raised, then the government will run out of money and be unable to pay its bills—it will default on its obligations, including interest payments to holders of Treasury bills, which include both foreign governments and most pension funds.

A default would damage the U.S. credit rating, and the government would face higher interest rates on future borrowing—meaning tens of billions of additional costs each year. Interest rates for home mortgages and business loans would also go up, and the entire economy would suffer, perhaps sliding into a recession.

It’s the job of Congress to pass budgets and debt ceiling legislation in a timely way. If they don’t, or if the President vetoes those bills, then we are the ones who will suffer.
Low Cost or Free Legal Help for Eastern Shore

I once asked a lawyer a question that rarely gets asked: Why is your fee so high? The answer was not what I expected: My fee is high to match what other lawyers charge. A follow-up question had to be asked: What if your fee was less than other lawyers? The answer was also unexpected: Charging less would mean my services were not as professional or as effective as other lawyers.

I found this strange since many lawyers offer pro bono services. Pro bono means work undertaken without charge, especially legal work for a client with a low income. Does this mean that pro bono legal services are unprofessional or ineffective? Absolutely not! It turns out that lawyers have a civic duty to provide pro bono services to low income or charitable organizations.

According to the American Bar Association rule ABA Model Rule 6.1, “Every lawyer, regardless of professional prominence or professional workload, has a responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay urging all lawyers to provide a minimum of 50 hours of pro bono services annually”. For the Eastern Shore, there is one non-profit organization whose mission is to provide pro bono legal services to Eastern Shore counties. Mid-Shore Pro Bono (http://midshoreprobono.org/), provides legal assistance to individuals in Talbot, Caroline, Kent, Dorchester and Queen Anne’s counties.

To apply for services, clients must complete an intake form either online or by calling 410-690-8128 to determine eligibility. It is important to know that you are not alone when you need a lawyer and can’t afford one. According to the staff, “Mid-Shore Pro Bono has grown to be a trusted bridge between members of our community who are looking for answers to legal questions but can’t afford attorneys and the lawyers and community resources able to provide those answers. We celebrate that every day.”

Bob Miller, CPA, Board Secretary, Mid-Shore Pro Bono

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” Common Sense seeks to support an Eastern Shore electorate informed by real facts—facts to help you make decisions, facts to help you make a difference. Our goal is to help voters to be aware of the personal and local impact of Federal and State government decisions. We seek an America responsive to its citizens and its Constitution.