



100 DAYS: County executive's first days a test of budgets, business and balance

Technology, school capacity, hikes in license fees among Kamenetz's early issues

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Reporter Steve Schuster asked officials and residents for their thoughts on County Executive Kevin Kamenetz's first 100 days in office. Read them here, and add your voice as well.

All Baltimore County executives must deal with budgets, department heads, legislation and cooperation with colleagues from Towson to Annapolis.

But in his first 100 days in office, County Executive Kevin Kamenetz had to do something four executives prior never had to face: Presiding over the burial of a firefighter killed in the line of duty.

On Jan. 19, Mark Falkenhan, a Lutherville volunteer firefighter, died while fighting a blaze in a Hillendale apartment. The active duty death was the first in Baltimore County since 1985.

Last week, recalling his first 100 days in office — the official date is March 15 — Kamenetz recalled that night when he went to the scene with Fire Chief John Hohman for the solemn duty of announcing Falkenhan's death.

He called the experience, "humbling and emotional."

"I really was speaking for the citizens of Baltimore County," he said, "but also my own personal emotions of being at the

(Enlarge) Talking about his first 100 days in office, County Executive Kevin Kamenetz said that he organized a lunch with former Baltimore County executives -- and all of them said the executive's position was the best job they had ever had. (Staff photo by Sarah Pastrana)

scene and seeing the family members and sharing in their grief."

If that was a low point of Kamenetz's first 100 days, he counts several high points on the balance sheet, among them economic initiatives, approval of departmental appointments and efforts to implement new technology that he said will bring efficiency and savings.

"It went by fast," said Kamenetz, a Democrat, of his first 100 days.

'Really tough times'

Shortly after taking office last December, after his victory over Republican Ken Holt in the General Election, Kamenetz announced plans to eliminate 143 county positions, much of it through attrition, as well as combine several county departments and eliminate four department head positions.

The administration said, all told, the cuts would save about \$8 million.

"These are really tough times," Kamenetz said last week. "We're in the worst recessionary period since the Great Depression."

The moves, he said, have helped solidify the county's AAA bond rating from national rating houses.

Kamenetz will unveil his first budget in April, but he said that because of sound management, "we have been able to avoid furloughs and layoffs of employees, and maintain a balanced budget."

That's the good news, but he said fiscal stability also makes Baltimore County a target in Annapolis.

"There's a natural temptation to look at Baltimore County and say, we can afford cutbacks from the state without difficulty, and that's simply not the case," he said.

"The state has some economic difficulties that they are facing, and we want to be a part of that solution, but we don't want the state to simply balance their budget on our backs."

Kamenetz said he has traveled to Annapolis on a weekly basis. State Sen. Jim Brochin said the executive's level of contact with the delegation has been noticed.

"It's an incredibly refreshing change," said Brochin, who represents Towson in the 42nd District. "Kevin ... returns calls and has an open line of communication. We don't always agree. But he has been very open and honest and great to work with."

At least one of the executive's trips included an appeal to legislators to enable the county to increase fees for various business licenses, many of which hadn't increased since 1920. While the proposal was met with mixed reviews, the delegation last week voted to support the plan.

Kamenetz has said the increases — projected to raise about \$1.2 million annually — are reasonable, and are needed to help bridge a projected \$38.5 million revenue shortfall in tax revenues, and likely cuts in state aid.

Getting a 'win'

Kamenetz focused early on economic development and boosting jobs. Three days into office, he announced a \$2.4 million redevelopment project on the site of vacant properties in Pikesville for a two-story retail and office building.

A month later, the administration announced a \$450,000 project for improvements of the Randallstown Library, and celebrated developer plans to construct a new Walmart Super Center along the Liberty Road corridor.

Earlier this month, Kamenetz proposed the Federal Center at Woodlawn Enterprise Zone for some 230 acres of industrial- and commercial-zoned land around the Social Security Administration, allowing employment and property tax credits to businesses locating there.

"We should be courting the growth of Social Security and other federal institutions," he said.

"I view segments of the county as having opportunity areas that we need to marshal our resources ... and get a 'win,' and then move on to other areas," he said.

He said he has visions for other areas of the county, including Catonsville and its connection to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, as a center "for cyber technology and clean energy," and Hunt Valley as "a great corporate center for businesses."

In Towson, he sees, "opportunities for empty nesters to move into downtown ... (and) ... to encourage the employees of Towson University to expand beyond the confines of just the campus."

And Kamenetz said he believes Baltimore County's proximity to Aberdeen and Fort Meade means benefits from the U.S. Military Base Realignment and Closure process — or BRAC.

The key to capturing economic growth, he said, is philosophical.

"I want to treat each of these businesses as our customers, and ask how the county can help them help their businesses," he said.

Matters of style

As he balances the job with a family life that includes wife, Jill, and sons Karson and Dylan, Kamenetz said his schedule as county executive is, in some ways, less daunting than the lifestyle he had been accustomed to over 16 years as a County Council member, state's attorney and private-sector attorney.

"It's easier than the life I had been living," Kamenetz said.

"With campaigning over the last year ... and now that I have one job as opposed to the three jobs, ... I actually find I have more time to do things at a more relaxed pace," Kamenetz said.

"Relaxed, for me, just means it's a 19-and-a-half-hour day," he quipped.

Serving on the County Council for four terms has helped the transition, he said. "The biggest challenge for me my first week was having to stop myself from getting off the elevator on the third floor."

Experience, he said, also helped guide decisions about his administration.

"Having the 16 years opportunity to observe the workings of county government, as well as serving under two county executives, I had a pretty good sense of different styles of government, and was offered a good opportunity to observe the strengths of different individuals who were already serving," he said.

His picks for department heads were embraced by the new County Council, but rankled some, particularly decisions to give former council colleagues Vince Gardina and Sam Moxley roles in the administration, and to bring back others who had left the county for the private sector, such as land-use attorney Arnold Jablon, who was named head of the new Department of Permits, Inspections and Approval.

"I really do not have anything nice to say about the first 100 days of the reign of Mr. Kamenetz," said Donna Spicer, an activist from Loch Raven. "After he announced that he was bringing back all the good old boys as department directors and such, I lost all hope that there would be positive changes ahead for Baltimore County."

But Kamenetz defends his appointments — and the makeup of his staff.

"We have doubled the minority participation on the executive level of staffing," he said. "We have been increasing numbers of women and minorities — not only department head additions, but deputy directors and mid-level managers.

"The goal is really to keep the county government vibrant ... and to allow new perspectives to help guide it."

The next 100 days

The next 100 days — and the days after that — will ultimately determine whether Kamenetz's first days were a success.

"How do we make decisions that don't just last for my four years in office, but last for a generation?" he asked.

Technology has been at the forefront of that goal. Last month, the administration announced 23 technology initiatives that Kamenetz said will allow more efficiency and, ultimately, savings.

They include online constituent services and increased technology to improve employee training and pension management, as well as technology to allow police officers to submit reports and generate

citations in the field.

One campaign idea that hasn't take off, though, is Kamenetz's proposal to create a water utility oversight commission to work with Baltimore City — which currently handles water delivery and infrastructure in the county.

Last week, Kamenetz said, "Perhaps we should really just create a partnership with the city where we can handle issues within Baltimore County ourselves and they can handle issues within Baltimore City themselves."

A plan has yet to be announced.

Other challenges have also arisen, including school capacity issues.

Kamenetz said innovation will continue to be his emphasis when issues surface — perhaps that's one of the motivations behind his idea this past week to explore space in county middle schools as a way to address elementary school overcrowding.

Since taking office, Kamenetz said one duty, in particular, gives him great pleasure — ceremonies that honor county workers and volunteers.

"It's actually humbling," he said. "It makes you step back and realize what you are doing is enabling those little opportunities for individuals to step forward and achieve something."

SAVE THE DATE: Join a live chat with County Executive Kevin Kamenetz on Thursday, March 31, from 11:30 a.m. to noon, at www.explorebaltimorecounty.com.



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