

# Faith-based group challenges candidates to back its social, housing agenda

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by Janel Davis

Staff Writer

"Will you meet with us?" was the question asked last week of 17 candidates who are seeking an elected county office this year during an Action in Montgomery meeting.

The faith-based organization, which includes about 35 congregations, met to set its legislative agenda for the election year.

More than 700 people attended the March 9 event, which was intended to educate AIM members about the agenda's goals and to challenge candidates to support them.

AIM broadened its goals this year, adding three initiatives to its ongoing housing and immigration efforts.

This year's goals include a "College Bound" education initiative, which would guarantee college scholarships to graduating high school seniors with at least a C+ average and a 90 percent attendance record. AIM wants to put a dedicated counselor in each high school who would work on getting students into college. As part of its initiative on community centers, AIM is proposing the county float a \$200 million bond to modernize area centers and open an immigration support center in the Burtonsville Community Center. Pedestrian safety is the group's third new initiative.

"AIM's agenda was created by you," Russ Louch, the organization's co-chairman, told the capacity crowd at Woodside United Methodist Church in Silver Spring. "We will not allow politics to continue as it has in the past."

At the meeting, Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele (R) and U.S. Rep. Christopher Van Hollen Jr. (D-Dist. 8) of Kensington updated members on the state's efforts to open a full-service immigration office in the county, a proposal submitted by AIM four years ago.



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David S. Spence?The Gazette

More than 700 representatives of religious congregations crowd Woodside United Methodist Church in Silver Spring last week to hear candidates pledge to promote the legislative agenda set out by Action In Montgomery, a coalition of faith-based groups. "We want God's politics done by God's people," the Rev. Jeff MacKnight told the crowd.

Van Hollen said an Immigration Services report had deemed a Montgomery County center unnecessary because of its proximity to an existing center in Baltimore. During the meeting, Steele, who is running for the U.S. Senate, signed a letter to various state and national officials, including U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, asking for help in opening a Montgomery office.

Each County Council and county executive candidate was allotted a 45-second introduction and an opportunity to promise to meet with AIM representatives.

Among those in attendance were council President George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, most of the council members and their announced challengers, and Councilman Steven A. Silverman and Isiah "Ike" Leggett, Democratic candidates for county executive.

"I was with you from the beginning six years ago when your organization was founded. I was the only candidate to support a dedicated housing initiative while on the council," Leggett told the crowd.

AIM is also coordinating a get-out-the-vote campaign. Although it does not endorse candidates, AIM does present a list of candidates who support its agenda. To hold candidates accountable, AIM plans another session in August.

"We'll record the answers so hopefully our members and voters can see who is doing what they said they would do," said Larry Froehlich, an AIM co-chairman. "Our goal is to establish relationships with the candidates not just at election time but all the time so that we become comfortable with them and they become comfortable with us."

#### **AIM's goals**

**"College Bound" -**

**Guarantee college scholarships for all county high school graduates with C+ average and at least 90 percent attendance, and put a dedicated counselor in each high school to help students get into college.**

**Community centers - Float a \$200 million bond to modernize area centers.**

**Pedestrian safety - Add traffic lights, widen crosswalks and reduce speed limits. Housing - Build 1,000 affordable and workforce housing units on public land by 2009.**

**Immigration - Open a full-service immigration office in the county.**