

Guest column: City proposal fits into larger picture



More than 31 people signed up to speak last week on the non-discrimination bill before the Annapolis City Council. (File art by Chase Cook, staff / Capital Gazette)

By **Alice Johnson Cain**

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Guest column: A vote against this ordinance is a vote for discrimination

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As one of the many Annapolitans who flocked to last week's City Council meeting to speak in support of Alderman Jared Littmann's proposed Non-discrimination of Foreign-Born Residents ordinance, I want to explain why so many of us believe this legislation is vital for Annapolis' future.

First, now is exactly the right time to expand our city's nondiscrimination laws. We face a time of great fear and uncertainty among many members of our community, none more than immigrant and refugee children and families.

As a leader of a nonprofit that works closely with teacher leaders in Maryland, among other states, I have heard from countless teachers in our state and across the country about the enormous fear felt by many students and families since Election Day. We heard from so many teachers, in fact, that our CEO sent a thank-you letter to teachers that read, in part:

"No teacher is immune from internalizing the fears and uncertainty their students are feeling at this moment in our history. I know that so many of you have been consumed by the needs of your students and that so many of them are relying on you to light their way.

"You have become a safe harbor to our most vulnerable students — to students of color, to students with special needs, to students who have emigrated from other nations — when it is unclear how much you will be able to protect them.

"You have had to uphold their hopes for an American dream, even as your own belief in this nation and our future has been shaken ...

"You have had to be the face of compassion, even as the larger world appears unkind."

I see this ordinance as a way of sending a similar message to those in our community for whom the larger world appears particularly unkind these days.

Second, when should discrimination *ever* be OK? A vote against this ordinance is a vote for discrimination — and the new army of activists that has been unleashed is watching.

I rode a packed bus with 40 or so women from Annapolis to Washington, D.C., on Jan. 21. Most had never been to a march before or to a City Council meeting. Over 1,000 people marched in Annapolis, and others marched in over 650 cities around the world.

This was not a one-time thing: It was a turning point already yielding more civic engagement at all levels of government. We have each other's email and social media addresses and we are using them to work to organize around our agenda of unity and inclusiveness.

When I stated last week that this ordinance meets that threshold of expanding inclusiveness and that I suspected that many of us would work to try to defeat any member of the City Council who votes against the

values we marched for last weekend, I was met with a roar of approval from the audience and sustained applause. Later, multiple people from the audience approached me with their email addresses and phone numbers and the message to count them in.

Finally, this ordinance will make our city safer, at a time when crime has been rising to unprecedented levels. We heard time and again last night from our foreign-born neighbors about the fear felt by some of their fellow immigrants and refugees who are from places where, unlike Annapolis, the police cannot be trusted. They can be hesitant to speak up, even if they witness a crime and could provide vital information. Ensuring that police can be community-builders who focus first and foremost on protecting public safety — rather than acting as de facto immigration officers — will allow our police force to be more successful in keeping us safe.

Now is the time for Annapolis to come together and support all of our neighbors — no matter where they were born — and to strengthen our community by facing the future together.

Alice Johnson Cain is a member of the Annapolis Education Commission and is the executive vice president of Teach Plus, a nonprofit that works to improve outcomes for underserved children.

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