

Lobbyists mass over gun control

Cox, Erin

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

The National Rifle Association and a trade organization representing the \$13.6 billion gun industry began work in Annapolis this week as the General Assembly prepared to debate some of the nation's strictest gun laws.

The NRA held a meeting for about 25 lawmakers Thursday to discuss strategy in a conversation expected to intensify as early as this morning, when Gov. Martin O'Malley releases details of his gun control plan. On Wednesday, the National Shooting Sports Foundation registered prominent Annapolis firm Alexander &Clever on its behalf.

O'Malley has proposed what he called "common-sense" measures that include licensing of handguns, a ban on assault rifles and providing more information about mental illness to the database used for background checks. Among the shooting foundation's members is the U.S. unit of gun manufacturer Beretta, based in Prince George's County, said Jake McGuigan, director of government relations for the trade group. The organization estimates that the gun industry has a \$228 million direct impact on Maryland.

"We're looking to just protect our interests and our industry in Maryland," McGuigan said. Beretta has hired veteran Annapolis lobbyist J. William Pitcher. Until recently, the company had been represented by the Venable law firm in Baltimore.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation happens to be based in Newtown, Conn., just two miles from the elementary school where the December killing of 20 school children and six educators sparked nationwide debate on gun laws and treatment for people with mental illnesses.

Gun control advocates, meanwhile, have been marshaling their forces. Faith-based groups, as well as mental health organizations fearful of laws that they say promote stigmas, have signed up to lobby.

A gun control group dissolved after Maryland tightened gun laws two decades ago has been revived as a political organization to help fight for the tougher gun laws O'Malley announced this week.

The newly re-created Marylanders To Prevent Gun Violence, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped pass gun laws that included a ban on assault pistols, will be helped by O'Malley's former political director, Rick Abbruzzese, now a lobbyist with Rifkin, Livingston, Levitan &Silver.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and former Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend have agreed to serve on the board of the group, which also hopes to raise money for a possible media campaign.

Last week, former Gov. Parris N. Glendening and University of Maryland law school professor Larry Gibson became leaders of Smart Gun Laws Maryland, an all-volunteer advocacy group for stricter gun laws.

After O'Malley released broad details of his plan this week, the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action posted a statement on its website saying law-abiding gun owners "should be alarmed" by his plan.

"Anti-gun politicians are attempting to offer up your constitutional rights as a sacrificial lamb because they WILL NOT focus on real solutions for the criminal acts of violence in Baltimore by gangs and drug dealers," the statement said. In addition to the group meeting in an Annapolis restaurant Thursday, the NRA met individually with lawmakers. Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said he declined an invitation to attend the group event and that he expected gun control to be among the most controversial discussions during the 90-day legislative session. Sen. James Brochin, a Baltimore County Democrat who said he supports an assault weapons ban but questions the need to license handgun owners or empower state police to inventory gun dealers, accepted the NRA's offer for a private meeting.

"I think they should be invited to the table," Brochin said. "We're going to do something, but we've got to do it right." The NRA's lobbyist in Annapolis, Shannon Alford, declined to discuss the organization's plans for Maryland. Alford formerly worked for House Minority Leader Anthony J. O'Donnell, a Republican.

ecox@baltsun.com

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