THE STATE OF THINGS

Consumers get tough

By Don and Val Hymes

The average guy has obviously lost a lot of confidence in government lately, especially in Maryland, as corruption scandals lace more than one county.

The people, in a word, are tired of being ripped off — by politicians as well as by businessmen — and that attitude had quite an impact in the last legislature.

For the first time, without much fanfare, the consumer had a lobbying force in Annapolis.

And for the first time, that lobby was able to coax through an entire package of bills, plus a few they didn't even ask for. Some major ones were lost, but thanks to the persistent consumer-lobbyists and a few reporters who detailed all consumer proposals throughout the session, for the first time they were noticed.

So as the legislators for the first time made it their business to find out what the consumers wanted, all of this happened:

The consumer protection division of the Maryland attorney general's office got new powers it didn't even ask for, such as the ability to make rules and issue cease-and-desist orders.

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The requirement that at least one consumer — or public member — be named to each of the 20 regulatory boards under the Department of Licensing and Regulation.

Auto repair shops must give customers a written estimate of any job over $50, and can not go over that estimate by 10 per cent without the customer's okay.

If you're delinquent paying your credit card bills, you could no longer be assessed a 15-per-cent attorney fee on late bills unless the company files suit.

If you've ever tilted with a computer, this one's for you: after Jan. 1, credit companies will have new rules to follow when customers ask about billing errors.

Door-to-door salesmen would come under tighter regulations, prohibiting, for example, certain confusing techniques and outlawing penalties for cancellations.

Three bills make it virtually impossible for landlords to evict tenants who complain about their apartments, or who organize or join tenant organizations.

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If a tenant finds unsafe or unsanitary conditions the landlord won't fix, the rent can be placed in an escrow account until the matter is rectified. Another new law demands the language of a lease be clear to the consumer.

If a new appliance isn't delivered, or proves defective, the buyer doesn't have to pay interest on his installment account until it's made good.

Although it wasn't labeled as a consumer's measure, the home mortgage interest rate bill found a number of protections amended into it. A lender cannot refuse a loan "solely on the basis of the geographic area or neighborhood or race, creed, color, age, sex, marital status, handicap or national origin," and prepayment penalties are not allowed. Tax and insurance escrow accounts must now pay interest.

Another new law prohibits housing discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status — another big victory for the female consumer.

The rent control bill was extended and the attorney general can now represent tenants if the county hasn't set up its own rent control procedures. And criminal penalties were added to give that law more teeth.

It wasn't, however, a total sweep for the consumers. Some of the major bills that died in the 11th hour of the 90-day session included those that would have clamped down on trailer park owners and regulated television repairmen and debt-collecting agents.

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Another that failed would have required the posting of prescription drug prices. Another would have prevented a bank from releasing account information without the customer's consent. Still another would have prevented the recording of credit information more than five years old be removed from the person's file.

So the consumer lobbyists, buoyed up their susesses and hailing this as the "year of the consumer," have a reason to return next year. This session's unfinished business, plus the gaps in the tax and campaign reform programs, have even inspired many of them to think of running for office themselves.

It may be the only way to do it, because the consumer lobby had something going for it this session that it won't have next time.

This is an election year.

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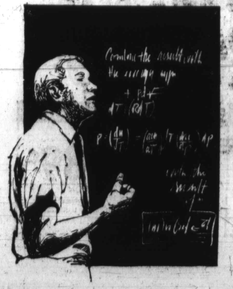

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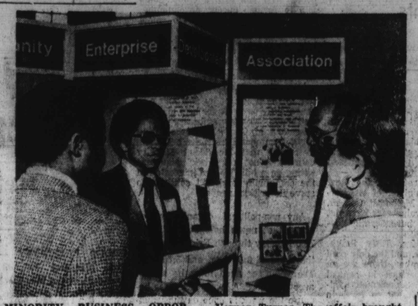

MINORITY BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY FAIR attendants present at the War Memorial auditorium last week included (from left) Olu Asani, Leonard A. Blackshear, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Turner. The affair brought together small and minority business people with large industry and government agencies for workshops and face-to-face counseling. (AFRO staff photo by Roman Hankewycz)

Greenspring, Morgan set tutorial

Students at Greenspring Junior High No. 62, are involved in an experimental tutorial program in cooperation with Morgan State College.

This program consists of Morgan students working with specific junior high pupils who need help in certain areas of study.

Approximately 25 Morgan students spend three hours each per week with the students from Greenspring in groups of five or less.

These students receive much needed individual help which cannot be received in normal classroom situations.

This experience has been beneficial to the Morgan students as well, because they are receiving first-hand experience as they learn more about the needs of today's children.

Mrs. Crawford is secretary of the year

MRS. DALE CRAWFORD

Mrs. Dale Crawford, secretary at Harlem Park Elementary School No. 33, has been named the Educational Secretary of the Year by the Baltimore City Educational Secretaries Association at its In-Service Training Program on April 17.

Mrs. Crawford has been a secretary in the Baltimore City Public School System since 1960. She has been a member of the Baltimore City Educational Secretaries Association since 1963 and has served on many committees, as financial secretary in 1968 and as president from 1971-73.

This year, Mrs. Crawford served as chairman of the In-Service Training Program, "Exp and M.B.O.," held on April 17 at Southwestern High School. She is also a member of the Task Force on Professional Development under the direction of the Office of Staff Development.

The award was made in recognition of her contribution to professional and civic organizations as well as the school system.

No new UF agencies this year

A one year moratorium on admission of new agencies to the United Fund of Central Maryland has been imposed by the Fund's Board of Directors.

"We feel that new money which is available for agency funding can best be spent for strengthening and helping to develop agencies that are already members," Fund President W. Wallace Lanahan explained.

Elections board sets new hours

New hours for the Board of Supervisors of Elections of Baltimore City will be from 8:30 a.m. until 4 p.m., Mondays through Fridays.

Fairmount Hi band entertains Columbia women

Fairmount Hill Junior-Senior High School band students were a musical hit at a recent meeting of the National Council of Negro Women held in Columbia, Md.

The students, under the direction of Mr. Jacob Saulsbury, were invited by the National Council's Columbia section to partipate in their scholarship-raising program which featured the Howard University Gospel Choir.

Arrangements for this cultural experience were made by Mrs. Vera Wilson, special assistant at Fairmount Hill and president of the National Council's Columbia section.

The Fairmount Hill band has also taken part in a recent meeting of the Fairmount Hill PTA and at the Black Heritage Program at Fairmount Hill.

Sunny Sunday May 5

The Baltimore Banners are the featured attraction at the Baltimore Promotion Council's first "Sunny Sunday" May 5 at the Inner Harbor.

Scheduled from noon to 5 p.m., "Sunny Sundays" include a variety of activities for the entire family. On display along the harbor's edge will be the works of two dozen area artists and craftsmen who will exhibit throughout the day. And the Maryland Chess Society will offer instruction and demonstrations on the fine points of chess.

Cultural exhibition Sunday

On Sunday, May 5 at 3 p.m. the Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument St., in cooperation with the Herbert M. Frisby Historical Society, will present a cultural exhibition and program entitled The Black Presence in Maryland.

MRS. VELMA B. RECTOR who has joined the staff of the American Lung Association of Maryland as director of planning and education for the Christmas Seal Agency.

Veterans Day set for May 4 at UMBC

Veterans Know Your Benefits Day will be observed at the University of Maryland Baltimore County Campus Gym from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., May 4.

To be attended by veterans from area colleges, the affair will be addressed by congressmen, officials from the mayor's office and Veterans Administration. All are invited.

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3 at Morgan named 1974 top educators

George A. Pruitt, vice president of student services, Dr. John A. Sweeney, professor, music, and James E. Lewis, professor of art, all of Morgan State College, have been recently chosen Outstanding Educators of America for 1974.

Each year, those chosen Outstanding Educators are featured in the national awards volume — OUTSTANDING EDUCATORS OF AMERICA, which includes introductory messages from prominent Americans and complete biographical sketches of the award-winners.

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