[Banner: Thiru Vignarajah gearing up for another run for Baltimore mayor](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/thiru-vignarajah-baltimore-mayor-43WUBAQPOBBH5PDN5BDPNV27CY/)

Thiru Vignarajah, a Democrat who ran unsuccessfully for Baltimore City State’s Attorney in 2022 and for mayor in 2020, is taking a major step toward another run for City Hall’s top office, confirming to The Baltimore Banner he is forming a campaign exploratory committee.

The exploratory committee is a formality that nonincumbent candidates generally undertake to signal to the public and donors that they are gearing up for a run.

Vignarajah’s entry would make the competitive Democratic primary even more interesting. Mayor Brandon Scott, former Mayor Sheila Dixon and businessman Bob Wallace have all declared for the race.

Dixon and Scott ate up the majority of prospective Democratic votes in a mid-September survey conducted by the Goucher College Poll in partnership with The Baltimore Banner. The poll also found that about one-quarter of voters wanted a candidate other than Scott or Dixon, even if they were the only candidates on the ballot.

Scott won the 2020 mayoral primary with 29.6% of the vote compared to Dixon’s 27.5%. Vignarajah finished fourth with 11.5% of the vote.

In a city of more than 570,000, where the last two mayoral primaries have been decided by fewer than 3,200 votes, a Vignarajah campaign has the potential to greatly impact the 2024 race.

Vignarajah confirmed the committee formation on Thursday during holiday travels in Sri Lanka, where his parents emigrated from, saying that supporters have urged him to enter “a stagnant contest between two status quo politicians funded and directed by special interests.”

“Residents need a real alternative, a real leader who, even when it’s politically inconvenient or against a powerful opponent, will fight for what’s best for the people,” he said. “I hope I’ve shown not through words, but through my work, that’s who I am and that I’m not going to quit.”

Vignarajah will have to decide within the next several weeks — the filing deadline to get on the ballot is early February.

He did not declare any fundraising in the most recent campaign finance reports, which were published nearly a year ago, saying he did not receive contributions of more than $1,000.

Vignarajah emailed a 185-page document detailing his past policy ideas to supporters this week, which includes a pledge to hire 600 more police officers, create a new cold case unit and strengthen enforcement of juvenile offenders.

“Some ideas have aged well and others may need to be refined or retired,” the document reads. “Either way, this document is meant to spark conversation about ideas and our work.”

“The analysis of this race from the get-go has been: Will anyone viable besides Sheila and Brandon get in?” said Mileah Kromer, associate professor of political science and the director of the Sarah T. Hughes Center for Politics at Goucher College.

But thanks to Vignarajah’s solid name recognition, especially compared to a candidate like Bob Wallace, he could appeal to anti-establishment voters who don’t want to vote for a current or former mayor, she said.

“In 2020, Thiru was the tough-on-crime candidate,” she said. “This time around, I’m curious how that will interact with Sheila’s base. It’s pretty clear that Dixon is trying to position herself as a candidate who can reduce crime and purposefully messaging to those voters. If those voters would go to Thiru, he would potentially eat into her base.”

Vignarajah has stayed in the public’s eye since his last unsuccessful run. He’s served as attorney for the family of Timothy Reynolds, who was shot and killed after he grabbed a bat and confronted a squeeqee worker at a busy downtown intersection in 2022, and for successful community efforts to block BGE from installing external regulators on homes. He’s also represented sex abuse victims of Catholic clergy and residents facing eviction from their homes.

The 47-year-old previously served as the Deputy Attorney General of Maryland, the chief of major investigations at the state’s attorney’s office, and an assistant U.S. attorney for the District of Maryland. He graduated from Woodlawn High School and received an undergraduate degree from Yale University and a master’s degree from King’s College London. He graduated from Harvard Law School, where he served as president of the Harvard Law Review.

[Sun: Thiru Vignarajah explores second bid for Baltimore mayor](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2023/12/22/thiru-vignarajah-explores-second-bid-for-baltimore-mayor/)

Thiru Vignarajah, a past candidate for Baltimore mayor and city state’s attorney, is once again considering a bid for mayor.

Vignarajah, a Democrat, has formed an exploratory committee to analyze the race, he announced this week via a news release.

“Folks have never been more frustrated with ineptitude and corruption in city government, and the current top candidates embody those frustrations,” Vignarajah said in the release. “Residents need a real alternative, a true leader who, even when it’s politically inconvenient or against a powerful opponent, will fight for what’s best for the people.”

A former partner at law firm DLA Piper and a prosecutor, Vignarajah has been a near-constant presence in city political races for the past six years.

In between races, Vignarajah has kept himself

in the public eye with TV news appearances and by taking up causes of public interest.

Vignarajah, who has told The Baltimore Sun that he has not ruled out a bid for the race, said in his news release he does not yet know when he will make a decision. The candidate filing deadline is Feb. 9. The Democratic primary is May 14.

If Vignarajah enters the race, he’ll set up a rematch with several of his rivals from the 2020 mayoral matchup. Mayor Brandon Scott has announced his plans to seek reelection, and former Mayor Sheila Dixon is also running to reclaim her seat. Both are Democrats. Robert Wallace, who ran as an independent candidate in 2020 for mayor, is running this cycle as a Democrat.

[CityBiz: Thiru Vignarajah Announces Exploratory Committee to Weigh Mayoral Bid](https://www.citybiz.co/article/502648/thiru-vignarajah-announces-exploratory-committee-to-weigh-mayoral-bid/)

Former deputy attorney general and federal prosecutor Thiru Vignarajah shared on Friday that he is exploring a possible run for Mayor. The former prosecutor, who ran a strong but unsuccessful race four years ago, has been urged by supporters for months to enter what appears to be a stagnant contest between two status quo politicians funded and directed by special interests.

Vignarajah acknowledged in an email to thousands of supporters last week that he is watching the race closely and invited them to share reflections on “A Blueprint for Baltimore,” a recently-released 125-page anthology that consolidates plans Vignarajah unveiled during his 2020 campaign addressing a wide range of issues from crime and education to corruption and the environment.

Pointing to the Blueprint, Vignarajah cited the continued lack of meaningful solutions from either campaign as part of why he is considering a run months after other candidates entered the race. Public polling has also suggested there is a significant block of residents who will not vote for either, and for both Brandon Scott and Sheila Dixon, many current supporters seem to lean toward them mainly because of their disdain for the alternative.

Vignarajah confirmed that a group of residents and community leaders are helping him analyze the political landscape and that the exploratory committee is focused on political viability, fundraising potential, and policy contrasts.

“Folks have never been more frustrated with ineptitude and corruption in city government, and the current top candidates embody those frustrations. Residents need a real alternative, a true leader who, even when it’s politically inconvenient or against a powerful opponent, will fight for what’s best for the people,” said Vignarajah. “I hope I’ve shown through my work that’s who I am and that I’m not going to quit.”

The Baltimore Banner was the first to report Vignarajah’s announcement, stating, “Vignarajah has stayed in the public’s eye since his last unsuccessful run. He’s served as attorney for the family of Timothy Reynolds, who was shot and killed after he grabbed a bat and confronted a squeegee worker at a busy downtown intersection in 2022, and for successful community efforts to block BGE from installing external regulators on homes. He’s also represented sex abuse victims of Catholic clergy and residents facing eviction from their homes.

The 47-year-old previously served as the Deputy Attorney General of Maryland, the chief of major investigations at the state’s attorney’s office, and an assistant U.S. attorney for the District of Maryland. He graduated from Woodlawn High School and received an undergraduate degree from Yale University and a master’s degree from King’s College London. He graduated from Harvard Law School, where he served as president of the Harvard Law Review.”

[CityBiz: Sanford Heisler Sharp Names Thiru Vignarajah Baltimore Office Managing Partner](https://www.citybiz.co/article/505096/sanford-heisler-sharp-names-thiru-vignarajah-baltimore-office-managing-partner/)

Sanford Heisler Sharp today announced Thiru Vignarajah became the firm’s new Baltimore Managing Partner on January 1, 2024.

A former President of the Harvard Law Review and law clerk to Justice Stephen G. Breyer, Vignarajah joined the firm from Capital Plus Financial, one of the country’s largest and most innovative Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI), where he has been CEO since August 2021. Prior to that, he was a litigation partner in DLA Piper’s Baltimore office.

“Thiru brings to our firm exceptional trial experience, as well as most impressive BigLaw, complex litigation, prosecutorial, and management skills,” said David Sanford, Co-Founder and Chairman of the firm. “We look forward to Thiru’s leadership in Baltimore and to the joinder of his deep-rooted passion for social justice and our historic commitment to civil rights.”

At Capital Plus Financial, Vignarajah ensured the CDFI was focused on barriers fueling the racial wealth gap, including access to capital, financial literacy, and mortgage discrimination. Under his leadership, Capital Plus launched a social impact venture competition that awarded $2 million to mission-driven startups that were tackling entrenched public policy problems from municipal procurement and public charter school enrollment to improving health outcomes for Black and brown communities. During Vignarajah’s tenure, Capital Plus was also awarded a $125 million bond guarantee from the U.S. Treasury Department, which was the largest award of the year and only one of five awarded to a CDFI.

At DLA Piper, Vignarajah’s practice focused on complex trial and appellate litigation, white collar and internal investigations, government relations, and global regulatory compliance. Before joining DLA, he was Deputy Attorney General of Maryland, where he was responsible for a wide portfolio of matters, including civil rights and juvenile justice, gun trafficking, environmental enforcement, criminal investigations, and appeals.

His additional prior experience includes service as Division Chief of the Major Investigations Unit at the State’s Attorney Office for Baltimore, where he led citywide efforts to prosecute violent repeat offenders and secured trial convictions in complex murder cases. He was also Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Violent Crimes section of the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Maryland.

“What defines Sanford Heisler Sharp is not just that it is the largest civil rights firm in the country, but also the values of equity and justice to which it has been dedicated for 20 years. The firm’s commitments are the same values to which I have devoted my career,” said Vignarajah. “I look forward to this unique opportunity to lead the firm’s growing Baltimore office and to continue the firm’s tradition of fighting for economic equity, standing up to big corporations, and forging a safer and more just society.”

Vignarajah earned undergraduate degrees in philosophy and political science from Yale University and a graduate degree in medical ethics at King’s College London. At Harvard Law School, in addition to serving as President of the Harvard Law Review, Vignarajah won the schoolwide Williston Negotiation Competition and graduated magna cum laude.

After graduation, Vignarajah was a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer and for Judge Guido Calabresi, Senior Judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

For over a decade, Vignarajah taught as a member of the adjunct faculty at the University of Maryland Law School and University of Baltimore Law School and at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland.

Vignarajah is well-known in Baltimore, where he has previously run for public office and recently announced his interest in the possibility of a second run for mayor of the city. According to the Baltimore Banner, his participation in the mayoral campaign has potential to greatly impact the 2024 race. Should Vignarajah decide to run again, his stand for office will reflect the values and commitment he brings to the firm: Fighting for economic equity, standing up to big corporations, and forging a safer and more just society.

Sanford Heisler Sharp is a public interest and civil rights law firm with offices in New York, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Palo Alto, Atlanta, Baltimore, Nashville, and San Diego. The firm focuses on employment discrimination, Title IX, wage and hour, whistleblower and qui tam, criminal/sexual violence, financial services, and Asian American litigation and finance matters. We have recovered over $1 billion for our clients through many verdicts and settlements.

[WBAL: Family of teen killed in mass shooting demanding more urgency in investigation](https://www.wbal.com/family-of-teen-killed-in-edmondson-village-mass-shooting-demanding-more-urgency-in-investigation/)

Relatives of a teen killed in a west Baltimore mass shooting last year are demanding more action to find those responsible.

Deanta Dorsey, 16, was killed in the quintuple shooting outside the Edmondson Village Shopping Center in January 2023. Now, the family of Dorsey, joined by former deputy attorney general Thiru Vignarajah, has called on police and prosecutors to do more on the case.

“I feel sad about the situation. There isn’t too much I can do,” Dorsey’s father said.

Police arrested one suspect in Dorsey’s murder just six weeks after the shooting. Despite knowing the involvement of a second shooter, who was seen on camera, nothing further has apparently been done.

“It doesn’t make any sense, and there’s no type of urgency being done,” Dorsey’s stepmother said.

The family has also learned of a city complaint against the center’s owners from 2021 over the crime situation there that was never filed. They want to know why.

“Just imagine being the family of a young man who was killed at this location after this complaint was sent and nothing was done,” Vignarajah said.

[Sun: Thiru Vignarajah, past candidate for Baltimore mayor and state’s attorney, enters 2024 mayoral race](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/01/24/thiru-vignarajah-baltimore-mayor-candidate-2024/)

Pledging to run a “different” kind of campaign, Thiru Vignarajah, a former prosecutor and past candidate for Baltimore mayor, announced a second bid for the office Wednesday.

In an interview with The Baltimore Sun, Vignarajah, who was recently named a managing partner at the national law firm of Sanford Heisler Sharp, said he was compelled to run again for mayor by a lack of public enthusiasm for the current field of candidates, evidenced by what he said was “underwhelming” fundraising on their behalf.

“I’ve watched, waited. I’ve been patient, hoping we would hear echoes of William Donald Schaefer from someone,” Vignarajah said, sitting in his 19th-floor office overlooking the Inner Harbor. “Whether it was Brandon [Scott] growing into that role or Sheila [Dixon] being inspired by that kind of vision. And it’s clear that’s not what the current choices are presenting.”

The late Schaefer, who served as Democratic mayor of Baltimore from 1971 to 1986 before becoming governor, was a relentless, enthusiastic promoter of his hometown, renowned for a “Do it now!” philosophy of resolving constituent concerns as well as pushing for the development of projects such as Oriole Park at Camden Yards and the National Aquarium.

Vignarajah, previously a partner at DLA Piper and a deputy Maryland attorney general, is a late entry to a field of Democrats that includes notable names.

Many of Vignarajah’s goals during the 2024 campaign are similar to those of 2020. He pledges to pursue free college educations for graduates of city public schools, make bus rides free citywide, reform procurement and implement a plan to cut property taxes in half over 10 years.

One significant difference from Vignarajah’s 2020 campaign stands out, however: Donors’ contributions.

When the first finance reports of his last mayoral campaign were filed in January 2020, Vignarajah had raised more than $1 million and was airing commercials and buying billboard ads. Last week, by comparison, Vignarajah filed a report with the state saying he had not raised or spent more than $1,000 in the last year.

Ahead of the 2024 race, the Smith family has backed Dixon. Campaign finance reports filed last week showed a PAC in support of Dixon raised more than $200,000 in support of her candidacy, $100,000 of which was contributed by David Smith. Family members and their associated businesses gave another $30,000 directly to Dixon’s campaign, finance records show.

Dixon [is] making frequent appearances on Fox 45, both ahead of and during her campaign. She has granted the station exclusive interviews and the station has aired her town hall events.

Vignarajah said he plans to take advantage of public campaign financing from Baltimore’s Fair Election Fund, which was established to reduce the role of large contributions in elections. To qualify, candidates for mayor must get contributions from at least 500 residents, each of no more than $150, and raise at least $40,000 that way. Vignarajah has not yet started raising the money, but this week he created a separate campaign fund, as required.

“We’ve never had that, not in the history of this city. The opportunity to elect a mayor that’s not bought and paid for,” Vignarajah said. “I think this is what a politician should do to break that cycle.” Asked how that squares with his past donations, Vignarajah said he received maximum $6,000 donations from numerous sources and his policy positions “rarely” reflected those of his donors.

“The positions I took before I ran, while I ran, and after I lost, precious few of them are the ones Jack Luetkemeyer or Mary Miller or David Smith or anyone else would be pushing,” he said, highlighting several past donors. John Luetkemeyer Jr. is a real estate developer, while Miller is a former undersecretary of the U.S. Treasury who also ran for mayor in 2020.

[Banner: Thiru Vignarajah joins Baltimore mayor race with publicly-funded campaign](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/thiru-vignarajah-mayor-baltimore-MBTCMAVZDBBO7MPTJARUM4FTAI/)

Thiru Vignarajah is joining the race for mayor, a month after taking initial steps to join a Democratic primary that includes Mayor Brandon Scott and former Mayor Sheila Dixon.

The former deputy attorney general for Maryland and now four-time candidate for office in Baltimore said he was pushed to enter the race after two major events last week: the latest batch of campaign finance reports from his rivals, which he was less than impressed by, and the purchase of the Baltimore Sun by David Smith, the executive chairman of Sinclair Inc. The Hunt Valley-based company owns and operates more than 190 television stations, including flagship WBFF Fox45.

The attorney hopes to catch a segment of voters who are seeking a different choice than Dixon or Scott. He gathered outside City Hall Wednesday morning alongside a group of about a dozen supporters — some of whom he has represented in pro bono cases — to announce his campaign. The frequent candidate for city office made light of his reputation for campaigning, acknowledging “a stiff breeze might have been enough to push” him into this race, but said he is not just running “for sport.”

“We have a chance to seize the opportunity of a race that is framed as a choice between corruption and incompetence, and coming in and disrupting that frame,” Vignarajah said in an interview ahead of the announcement.

This time, Vignarajah plans to run using Baltimore’s public financing system, which multiplies small donations made to candidates if they eschew contributions greater than $150 and any money from unions or PACs.

Vignarajah raised over $1 million in his previous mayoral run.

Vignarajah said he was concerned by the sale of The Sun. Smith told reporters he paid nine figures for the paper — or at least $100 million — and has told the paper’s reporters that they should look to Fox45′s work as an example to emulate.

“The disturbing news that a small group of individuals intend, it seems, to peddle so much influence over who runs the city and where the city goes? It’s not democratic,” Vignarajah said.

In documents filed last week, first-term Mayor Brandon Scott reported a war chest of $835,000, while former Mayor Sheila Dixon said she has $370,000 on hand. A super PAC in support of Dixon’s campaign reported raising just over $200,000, half of which was donated by Smith.

By Vignarajah’s estimation, the mayor’s race is “a million dollar race,” adding Wednesday that he believes he can raise that money through public financing. Mayoral candidates using public finance can receive up to $1.5 million in matched city funds.

Earlier this month, the employment and civil rights law firm Sanford Heisler Sharp announced that Vignarajah joined the group as managing partner of the Baltimore office. Speaking from his office overlooking the Inner Harbor, Vignarajah said the firm is supportive of his political ambitions and the time and energy it will take to pursue them.

A former president of the Harvard Law Review and law clerk to Justice Stephen G. Breyer, Vignarajah captured solid chunks of the 2018, 2020, and 2022 city electorates, but never made it across the finish line.

Vignarajah plans to run on many of the same policies that defined his previous campaigns — proof, he says, that he has never been bought by influential donors and instead stayed true to his core beliefs.

Those plans include free in-state college or trade school for Baltimore public school graduates, which he estimates will cost $10 million, as well as expanding the free Circulator bus routes across the city. He also plans to lobby the Maryland Transit Administration for free MTA buses throughout Baltimore, a process he said will likely take years longer than expanding Circulator routes.

Vignarajah also will present a plan to cut property tax rates for owner-occupied homes by half over ten years, a policy he advocated for in a 2021 Wall Street Journal op-ed. Renew Baltimore, a group of civic leaders including former City Solicitor Andre Davis, is calling for a similar rate cut made over seven years. Vignarajah said he is unaffiliated with the effort.

His crime plan includes bolstering law enforcement presence in Baltimore’s 12 most violent neighborhoods, establishing long-term investigative units that track repeat violent offenders, and reforming child support laws. According to a 2019 Abell Foundation study, Maryland’s policies, which include suspending drivers’ licenses and garnishing wages from parents in arrears, destabilize low-income Black families.

Fathers who are returning from prison with burdensome child support payments face hard choices, Vignarajah said. Would you work at Burger King and risk driving on a suspended license to get to your shift and make a minimum wage that is garnished, or “go around the corner back to your old crew and start dealing again?”

“That is not an irrational choice for them to return to the path that they know best,” he said. He pledged to pursue a policy that would eventually cancel child support debt for returning citizens, as long as they abide by the terms of their probation.

The newest addition to his agenda is to reject MCB Real Estate’s plans to overhaul Harborplace.

“We need a community-led, not developer-driven, design for what we should do with our most precious public space,” he said.

He plans to propose new rules for Baltimore’s spending board that would prohibit contractors who donate more than $250 to sitting members from bidding on city projects, except through blind applications. “The corruption in Baltimore City sometimes ends in state and federal indictments, and sometimes it ends in deals being given to donors” instead of what’s best for the city, he said.

Vignarajah is adamant that he can win this time. Even though campaigning is a source of joy and energy for him, he said, he wasn’t sure he would throw his hat in the race until it became evident to him that enough voters feel they are choosing between the lesser of two evils in a city he feels desperately needs better leadership.

“I’m gonna keep running until I win or until they fix this [City Hall],” he said. “If you want Thiru to go away, just fix it.”

[WBAL: Thiru Vignarajah enters 2024 race for Baltimore mayor](https://www.wbaltv.com/article/thiru-vignarajah-enters-2024-race-baltimore-mayor/46516179)

Thiru Vignarajah is again running for mayor of Baltimore, joining three other candidates who will be again running for the city's top office.

Speaking at his news conference held Wednesday morning outside Baltimore City Hall, Vignarajah was very upfront about his past years seeking office. He said he's running to give voters another choice.

"I am an optimist, maybe even an idealist, who believes not just that our best days are ahead, but that the way we get them is through plans and strategies and solutions, not the politics as usual that we have inherited," Vignarajah said.

Vignarajah's campaign focuses on several priorities, including free college, reducing property taxes and reinventing Harborplace.

Most recently, Vignarajah represented Federal Hill homeowners in their fight against Baltimore Gas and Electric's installation of external gas regulators.

[WYPR: A new candidate but familiar face: Thiru Vignarajah runs for Baltimore mayor](https://www.wypr.org/wypr-news/2024-01-24/a-new-candidate-but-familiar-face-thiru-vignarajah-runs-for-baltimore-mayor)

A former Maryland Deputy Attorney General with a history of running for public office, Thiru Vignarajah made his mayoral campaign official on Wednesday morning outside of City Hall.

In previous runs, he has self-financed his campaign but this time he plans to use the city’s public financing system. If candidates swear off contributions from unions, PACS, and donations greater than $150, the Fair Election Fund will multiply those smaller donations. When the bill creating the fund passed in 2019, proponents said it would equalize the field for candidates who aren’t backed by large corporate checks.

“Save your $6000 checks for people who you think you can buy, because all I’ll need you to do is buy me dinner,” said Vignarajah, who is running as a Democrat.

He stood surrounded by supporters, many of whom he helped or represented in his capacity as an attorney, including relatives of Timothy Reynolds: a Hampden man who was fatally shot by a teenage squeegee worker in 2022 after Reynolds allegedly came towards the worker with a baseball bat. The squeegee worker was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter last summer.

“Politics is rough business. And there are things that have been said about me that are unfair, there are things that have been said about me that are fair,” he said. “I have made mistakes. I have learned from those mistakes, I have grown as a person, as a manager, as a leader, as a human.”

As for his platform, Vignarajah said he wants to go beyond the typical mayoral talking points about crime. One of his main initiatives will be a secondary education program. He wants to create a program so that all high-school graduates of Baltimore City Public Schools can go to any college, public or private, in the state of Maryland for free. Between lower-cost public schools and universities that already offer free tuition for city graduates, Vignarajah estimates that the program would cost about $10 million a year.

Then, there’s Harborplace.

“We need a community led design, not a developer driven, profit-focused plan to build up luxury condos and apartments in the most precious public space in Baltimore,” he said, referring to the proposed nearly $1 billion plan by MCB Real Estate that includes two waterfront towers with residential units. “If we have to start from scratch, that is what we will do.”

[WBFF: Outdoor seating fine threat against Abbey Burger Bistro questioned by mayoral candidate](https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/outdoor-seating-fine-threat-against-abbey-burger-bistro-questioned-by-mayoral-candidate-abbey-burger-bistro-fells-point-parklet-havre-de-grace-mount-washington-marigot-miller-thiru-vignarajah-baltimore-city)

Abbey Burger Bistro in Fells Point is being forced to take down its parklet, causing backlash from a Baltimore mayoral candidate.

Thiru Vignarajah, a Democratic candidate for Baltimore City, joined Abbey Burger Bistro owner Marigot Miller outside of the restaurant's Fells Point location to discuss the confusion behind Baltimore City's order to have the restaurant take down its outdoor seating area.

Abbey Burger Bistro has to take down its parklet in order to avoid a fine threatened by Baltimore City. Vignarajah seemed confused as to why Abbey Burger Bistro is being singled out by the city.

"Marigot and Abbey Burger are not asking for a handout. They're asking for an explanation," he said. "They're not asking for special treatment. They're asking for the same treatment as the businesses around the corner and up the street. It doesn't make any sense to shut down something that is working, that isn't hurting anyone, that both the business and customers like."

Miller owns and operates the Fells Point location, and she said she was just as confused as Vignarajah as to why the restaurant has to take down its parklet.

"I don't understand why we can't keep the parklets. I'm just confused," she said. "We're absolutely in compliance with the city. We're taking it down when they ask. I just hope that our business can survive."

She specified that Baltimore City gave her an order last Wednesday, January 24, to take down the parklet in seven days, or else she would be fined.

Additionally, Vignarajah pointed out that the city is still allowing many other restaurants to keep their parklets and outdoor seating.

[Baltimore Fishbowl: Mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah pledges to block construction of high-rise apartments at Harborplace if he’s elected](https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/mayoral-candidate-thiru-vignarajah-pledges-to-block-construction-of-high-rise-apartments-at-harborplace-if-hes-elected/)

Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah on Monday pledged to block the proposed construction of high-rise apartment buildings at Harborplace if he’s elected mayor.

In a morning news conference at McKeldin Square, Vignarajah criticized MCB’s $500 million proposal to redevelop the city-owned Harborplace property at Pratt and Light streets and called for a different approach.

Vignarajah said he particularly objects to plans by MCB to construct two apartment towers — rising 25 and 32 stories and containing a total of 900 to 1000 residences — on city-owned parkland where zoning does not currently permit housing. The developer has asked Baltimore’s City Council to rezone the land and waive current height limits to permit the two towers.

Vignarajah’s stance makes him the first candidate to take a strong stand against MCB’s redevelopment plan and make it a signature campaign issue. It sets him apart from current Mayor Brandon Scott, who has endorsed the plan and bragged that he secretly directed city agencies to assist MCB managing partner P. David Bramble.

Former “Mayor William Donald Schaefer would be turning over in his grave if he knew, thought, imagined that a future mayor might take this consecrated public ground and turn it over to developers to turn it into luxury high rises,” Vignarajah said.

“I am here to make a public pledge that what they are proposing will not happen when I am mayor,” he continued. “I will block the proposed construction of luxury high-rises in the Inner Harbor. We will not allow this most precious public space we have — certainly in Baltimore, perhaps on the Eastern seaboard — to be turned into an exclusive resort” for the wealthy.

In addition to two residential towers in place of the Light Street pavilion of Harborplace, MCB’s multi-phase proposal calls for offices, shops, restaurants, public space with a 2,000 seat amphitheater, and a two-tiered waterfront promenade.

MCB managing partner P. David Bramble has agreed to honor any requirements to set aside a certain percentage of apartments in the development as ‘affordable housing.’ But in a recent information session at the Maryland Science Center, he acknowledged that the rest of the units would rent for $3 per square foot per month, or $3000 a month for a 1,000-square-foot apartment, making them among the most expensive apartments in the city.

Vignarajah made his pledge the same week that a citizen’s group called the Inner Harbor Coalition launched a website to build support for its efforts to block “large scale commercial development” on city-owned Harborplace property, which is designated public parkland in the City Charter. The website is innerharborcoalition.org.

“In June of 1967 a promise was made to all future generations of Baltimoreans that our Inner Harbor waterfront would forever be dedicated public space,” the website states.

“Our current city leadership wishes to renege on that promise and allow large scale commercial development in our park.

“In the same way citizen action was able to save many Baltimore neighborhoods from eradication by a highway, citizen action is again necessary to keep Baltimore’s Inner Harbor a public park accessible to all.

“Our coalition is growing rapidly as more and more people learn about the plans to transform our public waterfront into yet another commercial development. We hope that you will join us.”

Vignarajah echoed those concerns in his statements at McKeldin Square, a city-owned public space and free speech zone that MCB hopes to make part of an expanded Harborplace redevelopment footprint. He was joined by economist Anirban Basu, American Visionary Art Museum co-founder Rebecca Hoffberger and a dozen others who support his position.

The candidate said he believes there are plenty of other parcels where luxury high rise apartments can be constructed in Baltimore, including the former News American site at 300 East Pratt Street that MCB controls. He also pointed to existing upscale housing at 414 Light Street, Harbor East and Baltimore Peninsula

“It is not as though we don’t have enough fancy apartments for fancy people,” he said. “What we don’t have enough of is public spaces and public parks, places that we can bring our families to celebrate all that is best and beautiful about Baltimore.”

Vignarjah said he isn’t against development, and he said would like to see affordable housing built all around the city. But “If you do want to build for the ultra-rich,” he said, “build on a property you already own.”

Asked what he would like to see happen at Harborplace, he said he believes the public needs to have more of a say in what is built there and that the city shouldn’t leave planning up to a private developer.

“I want to hear what the public wants to see here,” he said. “And the way to learn that is the way that other cities have gone about designing and developing their most rarefied public spaces – Vancouver with Coal Harbor. New York City with the High Line. Sydney, Australia, with the Sydney Opera House. What they did was they had a master plan, they had a community-led process where, over the course of months, in a series of dozens of charrettes, people in communities come together and say this is what we want.”

Vignarajah said he would assemble the best urban planners and thinkers to draw up a master plan to guide redevelopment of the Inner Harbor shoreline, with input from the public. Then once a master plan has been developed, he said, he would hold an international competition and seek design proposals that are in keeping with the agreed-upon master plan, and then have a blue-ribbon panel pick the best proposal to get built.

“We should assemble the greatest minds to think about the future of public spaces,” he said. “We should make sure there is representation from every walk of life and from every corner of the city, and collectively they should both gather public input and then channel that public voice into what becomes of our Inner Harbor.”

Above all, Vignarajah said, he wants the public to have a say in every step of the process. He said he wants ideas that “come from the people,” not developers. “I want it to come from a democratic process that’s done in open daylight,” he said.

If MCB wants to participate, he said, it would be welcome, but it would have to compete with everyone else. In his scenario, he said, “the developer comes at the end of the story, not the beginning. Developers don’t design our public spaces. They bid for the privilege of building them. And if they can’t make it profitable, I promise you someone else will.”

In the case of Harborplace, “we’re not talking about brownfields on the wrong side of the water that have no development and no arteries,” he said. “Look around you. [The Inner Harbor] is the easiest place in the world to build something that is both profitable and magical. Don’t set up this false dichotomy that the only way you can make a profit here is by destroying our public spaces…We know that a competitive process yields viable, profitable options.”

MCB officials argue that they did have an international competition for part of the site and chose a design for 10-story building called The Sail, by a firm called 3XN Architects from Copenhagen. But they never said who participated in the competition other than the winner, and they never showed any of the submissions that weren’t selected.

In other design competitions for buildings on public land, such as the University of Baltimore’s design competition for its law school at Charles Street and Mount Royal Avenue, or the Smithsonian Institution’s competition for a team to design its National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall, all of the entries were displayed in public before a winner was announced.

Even though elected officials such as Scott and City Council President Nick Mosby have backed MCB’s redevelopment proposal for Harborplace, construction can’t begin unless voters approve the plan in a citywide referendum.

In October, Mosby and City Council member Eric Costello introduced legislation that would give city residents a chance to support MCB’s project or turn it down at the ballot box in November. The council’s Economic and Community Development Committee will hold a hearing next week on that bill and others needed to change zoning and waive heights limits on the Harborplace property. The hearing will be held on February 13 at 2 p.m. at Baltimore City Hall, 100 N. Holliday Street.

[Sun: Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah calls Harborplace proposal ‘backroom deal,’ pledges to fight it](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/02/05/baltimore-mayoral-candidate-thiru-vignarajah-calls-harborplace-proposal-backroom-deal-pledges-to-fight-it/)

Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah pledged Monday to block a $900 million redevelopment proposal for Baltimore’s Harborplace, calling it a “backroom deal” and an “exclusive resort for the wealthiest of the wealthy.”

Vignarajah, a Democrat who entered the race last month, was particularly critical of a portion of the proposal that calls for apartments at the waterfront site.

Baltimore-based MCB Real Estate has proposed demolishing the waterfront shopping and dining pavilions that for decades have symbolized the Inner Harbor attraction and replacing them with four taller, mixed-use buildings, including a conjoined tower with around 900 apartments, one smaller building in a large new park, a two-tier promenade and realigned roadways.

“William Donald Schaefer would be turning over in his grave if he knew, if he thought, if he imagined that a future mayor might take this consecrated public ground and turn it over to developers to turn into luxury high rises for the sake of a few thousand dollars of campaign donations,” Vignarajah said, evoking Schaefer, the city’s mayor from 1971 to 1987 who dedicated Harborplace.

Speaking during a news conference from the adjacent McKeldin Square, Vignarajah said the proposal, which became public in October, lacked sufficient public input. Developers said they did public forums and door-to-door outreach in preparation for the plan, but the details and scope remained under wraps until the public announcement from developers.

Economist Anirban Basu, who stood alongside Vignarajah for the news conference, said he did not believe the public was the driver for a plan that includes $400 million in public investment, private residences and a reduction in the size of nearby roads. Developer David Bramble has said he expects the proposal to require $500 million in private investment as well as $400 million in public funds.

“That process was clearly a sham,” Basu said.

Vignarajah stopped short Monday of saying what he would prefer to see at Harborplace, arguing the city should form a blue ribbon commission to study the idea and seek widespread input from the public. Only after that process should a developer be selected, he said.

Since its public introduction, MCB’s proposal received the blessing of Baltimore’s Planning Commission in December after hours of testimony for and against the plan. Several charter amendments are still needed to alter the land uses in and around Harborplace. The Baltimore City Council is due to discuss those proposed amendments this month. If approved, they could be put to voters via a referendum in November.

Vignarajah repeatedly suggested Monday that Bramble received favorable consideration to develop the property as a result of his political donations. He called on fellow mayoral candidates Mayor Brandon Scott and former Mayor Sheila Dixon on Monday to join him in a pledge to block luxury residential units on the site. Both are Democrats.

If both decline, “then you know everything you need to know about who they answer to,” Vignarajah said.

MCB Property Services, an arm of Harborplace developer MCB Real Estate, gave Scott $6,000 in October, his most recent finance filings show. Peter Pinkard, MCB’s managing partner, and Drew Gorman, a principal, each contributed $5,000. Pinkard’s donation arrived in January while Gorman made his in November. Principal and Chief Investment Officer Michael Trail gave $4,000 in November.

MCB has donated to Scott in the past. The company gave the mayor a $6,000 maximum donation in 2022 while Bramble contributed $3,000 that year. Bramble gave an additional $1,000 in January 2023.

Neither the company nor Bramble has given to Dixon ahead of the 2024 mayoral race. Vignarajah said he has never taken donations from Bramble.

Bramble and his company have donated thousands of dollars to members and candidates for Baltimore City Council. During the council’s current term, Bramble and MCB have given $7,000 to Council President Nick Mosby, $3,000 to Councilman Zeke Cohen, $2,000 to Councilman John Bullock, $3,000 to Councilman Mark Conway, $9,500 to Councilman James Torrence, $2,500 to Councilman Eric Costello and $500 to Councilwoman Danielle McCray. Shannon Sneed, a candidate for council president, received a $150 donation. All are Democrats.

A spokeswoman for Bramble did not respond to a request for comment.

Opponents of the Bramble proposal argue it would essentially privatize the public Inner Harbor shoreline, a city park where charter amendments in the late 1970s locked in 26 acres of open space but paved the way for shops and restaurants in the pavilions. During two Baltimore Planning Commission hearings in November and December, opponents objected to the proposed removal of height restrictions, the addition of hundreds of apartments that would block views and road narrowing that they say would snarl downtown traffic.

A group called the Inner Harbor Coalition has organized to lobby city and state officials to reverse course on the project. They have threatened to try to place a competition ballot question on November ballots if necessary.

[Sun: Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah could access up to $1.7M in public money for campaign](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/02/05/baltimore-mayoral-candidate-thiru-vignarajah-could-access-up-to-1-7m-in-public-money-for-campaign/)

In his previous three bids for office, Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah has run financially competitive campaigns, some costing upward of $1 million, fueled by donations from some of the region’s most well-funded business executives and community leaders.

In 2024, however, Vignarajah hopes to harness hundreds of thousands of dollars in public money — potentially up to $1.7 million — to help pay for his campaign. As the Democratic former prosecutor made his campaign for mayor public last month, he said he expects to once again make it a $1 million run, this time with the support of the taxpayers.

“I’m very confident,” he said of reaching the figure. “I think we’re going to do a lot better than that.”

Vignarajah is a recent addition to a Democratic mayoral field that already includes incumbent Mayor Brandon Scott, former Mayor Sheila Dixon and businessman Robert Wallace in addition to several lesser-known candidates. The filing deadline for the May 14 primary is Friday.

The 2024 election cycle marks the first time that Vignarajah and others are able to tap public resources for campaign purposes in Baltimore. The money, distributed by the Baltimore City Fair Election Fund, became available following the approval of a ballot question in 2018. That question, favored by 75% of voters, authorized the creation of the fund, which now has been financed primarily from the city’s budget. Grants and donations are accepted, too.

Last year, Baltimore allocated $2 million to the fund, with the intention to replenish it as the fund is drawn down, according to the city’s most recent budget documents. Candidates have been told $2.2 million is available through the end of the current fiscal year in June.

The fund operates by matching donations, so candidates must raise their own money to take money from the fund. They are limited, however, in how much they can raise. A candidate can accept no more than $150 from each donor, and donors need to be city residents for a candidate to receive matching funds. Candidates using public financing cannot take money from campaign or political action committees.

The fund was structured with the hope of reducing the role of large private donations that have long been the lifeblood of campaigns in Baltimore and elsewhere. It also was designed to encourage candidates to seek local donations, said Emily Scarr, director of Maryland PIRG, a consumer protection group that lobbied for the creation of Baltimore’s fund and similar ones across Maryland.

“For too long races for office in Baltimore City have been dominated by large donations and special interest donations, which are just far outside what most Baltimoreans can afford to make,” Scarr said.

That perceived divide exacerbates concerns that elected officials are not listening to the concerns of everyday citizens, she said.

The amount candidates can hope to receive from the fund depends on the office they are running for. While mayoral candidates like Vignarajah can receive up to $1.7 million from the fund, candidates for council president are limited to $425,000 in public funds. Comptroller candidates max out at $250,000 while council candidates can get no more than $125,000.

Unspent money at the end of a publicly financed candidate’s campaign must be returned to the fund.

In addition to Vignarajah, Shannon Sneed, a Democrat running for council president, Democratic mayoral candidate Wendy Bozel and District 11 Democratic council candidate Zac Blanchard also hope to make use of the funds in 2024.

Sneed and Blanchard already have qualified, which candidates do by reaching an initial threshold of money raised from small donors. As they qualify, candidates using public financing earn a one-time “qualifying boost.” Mayoral candidates receive $200,000 when they raise at least 500 donations from city residents of no more than $150 each, totaling at least $40,000. Qualifying boosts for other offices are smaller. Council president candidates like Sneed get $50,000 after raising an initial $15,000. Council candidates do not receive a boost.

After the boost, funds are matched based on a ratio spelled out by the Baltimore City Fair Election Fund. The first $25 of each contribution is matched with $9 for every $1. The next $50 is matched on a $5-to-$1 ratio. Any money over $75 is matched on a $2-to-$1 ratio. For every $150 donation made after the qualification boost, mayoral candidates stand to receive $625 in public funds.

For proven fundraisers like Vignarajah, the system has high potential. Vignarajah received donations from hundreds of individual donors during his 2020 mayoral bid. So far, his participation also has presented a political opportunity. In the first interviews of his campaign, Vignarajah has tried to position himself as a candidate unbeholden to special interests and powerful wealthy donors.

“We’ve never had that, not in the history of this city, the opportunity to elect a mayor who is almost by definition not bought and paid for,” Vignarajah told The Baltimore Sun last month.

Asked how that squares against his record of high-dollar donations, Vignarajah said he has always been a believer in public financing. But it was not available until now, he said.

“When public financing is not on the table, you do what is needed to raise the resources,” he said of his past campaigns.

Scarr acknowledged that the amount mayoral candidates can draw from public financing is large, but that’s what is required to be competitive in a city mayoral race, she said.

“If we’re not paying that money, who is?” she asked. “Do you want to be the one paying or do you want out-of-state corporations or wealthy Marylanders paying for elections?”

“We pay for our poll workers, we pay for our voting booths,” Scarr said. “This is just another cost of our democracy.”

Scarr encouraged all candidates, proven fundraisers and otherwise, to use public financing. The system forces candidates to seek widespread community support, she said.

“This isn’t about just giving people who can’t fundraise an opportunity to run for office,” she said. “This is about fundamentally changing how candidates run for election.”

Maryland PIRG has studied the results of public financing efforts in Howard and Montgomery counties, where public campaign financing became available in 2022 and 2018, respectively. For 2022, the group found that average donations were $124 for candidates who qualified for public financing compared with $2,137 for candidates who did not participate. Donations also appeared to come from a wider base. On average, 689 people contributed to qualifying candidates, while an average of 244 people donated to those who did not participate.

Other municipalities in addition to Baltimore have moved to create similar funds. Public financing has been approved in Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Prince George’s counties and will become available in 2026.

[Sun: Mayor’s race - Vignarajah challenges Scott’s management of $641M pandemic aid](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/scott-vignarajah-pandemic-money-DJM6WUN6OFDNTIVIE3RBHKJ5P4/)

Mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah argued Thursday that Mayor Brandon Scott has gravely mismanaged Baltimore’s influx of $641 million in federal pandemic aid, handing out multimillion-dollar grants to political allies while risking forfeiture of funds as federal spending deadlines loom.

Scott, a first-term Democrat, has distributed the city’s hundreds of millions of dollars in pandemic aid across dozens of different agencies and nonprofits and nearly as many projects. His investments range from almost $50 million for fostering nonpolicing approaches to violent crime to affordable housing, blight remediation, meal programs and internet.

Tens of millions of the total allocation has gone toward financing work by nonprofits and other local organizations, an approach Vignarajah argued the mayor has deployed in an effort to curry political favor across the city for his reelection.

“Taking $641 million and essentially flushing it down the toilet to repay donors and developers and pad agency budgets and give millions of dollars to your favorite nonprofits as you gear up for reelection,” the attorney said Thursday in a press conference at his downtown law office, “is the biggest, most unforgivable mistake of this mayor’s administration.”

So far, the Scott administration has gotten its allotment of American Rescue Plan Act funding out the door slowly. Baltimore faces an end-of-2026 deadline to spend its $641 million, as well as a more pressing end-of-2024 deadline to have it all earmarked. Officials with the city’s pandemic aid office have warned for months that meeting those deadlines could require pulling money back from slow-developing projects and directing it elsewhere.

What those changes could look like remains unclear, but the city’s pandemic aid director stressed to City Council members last week that having all of the money earmarked by the end of the year “is for sure going to be a challenge.” Shamiah Kerney, director of the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Programs, added that she expects to have an assessment completed by the end of March, after which the city could begin to publicize changes to its spending plan.

As of the end of December, the city had spent just under 30% of its $641 million. About half of the total allotment had been obligated — meaning the city has approved contracts and invoices — leaving just 10 months to lock in the remainder of the spending plan. Baltimore’s obligation rate lags behind other large cities around the country, said Glencora Haskins, senior researcher for the think tank Brookings Metro, on Thursday. Nationwide, Brookings tracking has found that 68% of the funding distributed to cities of over 250,000 people had been obligated by the end of September — an earlier benchmark than is reflected in the Baltimore data.

Vignarajah, a former Maryland deputy attorney general and four-time candidate for citywide office, is running a publicly financed campaign for the mayor’s office in a crowded field that also includes businessman Bob Wallace, the incumbent Scott and former Mayor Sheila Dixon.

Among the American Rescue Plan Act grants singled out by Vignarajah, the Scott administration gave $5 million for the redevelopment of Lexington Market and $2 million to the labor union 1199 SEIU, to support frontline workers. Thibault Manekin, the founder of Lexington Market developer Seawall, is a longtime donor to Scott and most recently gave $5,000 to his reelection campaign, while 1199 SEIU backed Scott in 2020.

Vignarajah also criticized the $15 million investment Scott used to launch Clean Corps, the community cleaning program that has become a flashpoint for some who argue more money should have gone to the city’s Department of Public Works to restore services that have lagged since the pandemic.

In a statement, Scott’s campaign dismissed Vignarajah’s criticisms as a gambit to get media attention since he no longer has the backing of David Smith, the Sinclair, Inc. executive chairman and new Baltimore Sun owner whose family members previously donated to Vignarajah. Smith has put his money behind a super PAC supporting Dixon. Scott’s campaign pointed to national recognition the Scott administration has received for its management of its American Rescue Plan funds and argued their investments have driven a decline in homicides, supported long-neglected rec centers and playgrounds and helped expand affordable housing.

”For all of Mr. Vignarajah’s pretend concern, he offered no viable vision for how he would use this funding — which seems to be becoming a pattern of his campaign.” said Scott campaign manager Nicholas Simões Machado.

Scott has used more than $12 million of the pandemic package to stand up the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Programs, an administrative team tasked with overseeing American Rescue Plan Act spending and ensuring compliance. The office publishes monthly reports to City Council outlining its breakdown of pandemic aid spending by agency and organization and maintains a public dashboard on spending progress. The recovery office fielded hundreds of applications for funding from city agencies, nonprofits and third-party organizations, basing funding decisions on evaluations of potential impacts, risks and equity considerations.

Vignarajah laid out a series of demands concerning oversight of the American Rescue Plan Act spending, including calling for an immediate “forensic audit” of Scott’s grants. The federal money is already subject to several rigorous oversight requirements, including quarterly reports to the U.S. Department of the Treasury detailing grants and progress and is subject to an annual expenditure audit.

The slow-moving gears of city government, as well as efforts by Scott to support historically overlooked communities, have also posed challenges for the city’s spending goals, however. According to dozens of internal risk evaluations obtained last year by The Baltimore Banner, roughly 38% of the city’s assessed grant recipients were marked as “Medium/High Risk” of running afoul of federal compliance standards, including most of the agencies with the largest allotments of the city’s millions.

Vignarajah also called on Scott to stop obligating funds after the Democratic primary in May, in case the mayor doesn’t win his bid for reelection. In the event that Scott is voted out of office this May, Vignarajah argued that the mayor should allow the winner to convene a public commission to reprioritize the remaining stimulus money and call a special session of the Board of Estimates to earmark the plan in time for the end-of-year deadline.

Though Vignarajah stressed a need for a more publicly driven process to determine how the city spends its American Rescue Plan Act funds, he said his own preference would have been investing in infrastructure projects whose benefit lasts long beyond the expiration of the federal windfall. He pointed, among other examples, to the repurposing of an old K-Mart in Phoenix, Arizona, as a workforce training center and Cleveland’s $21 million plan for a waterfront redevelopment project.

If elected, the attorney said he would appoint a special counsel in his first 30 days to investigate “mismanagement” of funds and bar campaign donors from applying for city contracts unless subject to a blind bidding process.

Asked whether he’s concerned about the city’s ability to meet the end-of-year obligation deadline, Vignarajah pointed to other problems the city has had managing federal funding, including administrative lapses that nearly forfeited $10 million in federal funding for homeless services last year. But he also expressed confidence about the capacity of city government to get all of the money earmarked by the end of the year.

“Cities, for better or worse, know how to spend, but they have to have a timetable,” he said. “I am worried because we’ve seen errors of that grave scale before. But I hope and pray that if push comes to shove, we will at least obligate the money instead of giving it back all together.”

[CityBiz: Vignarajah Demands Forensic Audit of $641M in ARPA Funds](https://www.citybiz.co/article/523798/vignarajah-demands-forensic-audit-of-641m-in-arpa-funds/)

February 22, 2024, 12 PM, at 111 S. Calvert Street (19th Floor), Democratic mayoral candidate and former Deputy Attorney General Thiru Vignarajah will condemn the Mayor’s total mismanagement of $641 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds—that includes both the lack of timely and transparent spending as the City nears a critical federal deadline that, if missed, will cost Baltimore the remainder of the funds and the use of taxpayer dollars as a political slush fund to repay donors and developers and curry favor with special interests.

The public deserves to know more about this major expenditure, and the campaign is prepared to send in advance its presentation slides to all outlets that expect to attend the press conference or report on the issue. Please make that request directly to press@votethiru.com.

Concerned the public is oblivious to how hundreds of millions in federal funds are being spent, Vignarajah will lead a presentation that outlines (a) where the money is headed and how much still has to be spent; (b) the list of nonprofits that were selected (who knows how?) to receive funds; (c) examples of the Mayor repaying political favors and campaign donations; and (d) illustrations of what other cities did with their federal allotment.

“The Mayor has frittered away a once-in-a-century opportunity, padding agency budgets, repaying favors to donors and developers, and feeding pet projects and special interests,” said Vignarajah. “Squandering $641 million is this Mayor’s biggest, most unforgivable mistake.”

Here are a couple examples that will be discussed:

– Mayor Scott gave $5 million to Seawall Development (Lexington Market) whose owners donated thousands in campaign contributions to the Mayor.

– Mayor Scott gave $2 million to SEIU whose PAC has donated thousands to his campaigns.

This is the same Mayor who gave $2.2 million to the deputy mayor’s husband, who donated to his reelection campaign and whose downtown venue hosted the Mayor’s reelection fundraiser.

Perhaps the only thing that may be worse is not spending the money at all. Baltimore is at risk of that, since less than half the funds—some $254 million—have been formally committed, which means the City has only until December to obligate hundreds of millions more in federal funds.

At the press conference, Vignarajah will make three demands of the Mayor:

1. Launch an independent forensic audit right now of how the funds are being spent.

2. Stop obligating funds in May 2024 in the event the Mayor loses the Democratic primary and allow the winner of the Democratic primary to convene a public commission to decide on how the remainder of the funds should be obligated, which could take place during a special session of the Board of Estimates in December after the next Mayor takes office and before the December 31 deadline.

3. Explain publicly how allocations were made and by whom with a specific focus on how certain nonprofits and not others were chosen and why Lexington Market got $5 million.

Vignarajah will also make two pledges himself:

1. Appoint a Special Counsel in his first 30 days to investigate diversion and mismanagement of funds, referring misconduct for prosecution, reclaiming misspent or unspent funds for better use, and issuing a public report within 90 days.

2. Forbid campaign donors from applying for city procurement contracts except with respect to projects subject to blind competitive bidding.

[WBFF: TICK TOCK | Baltimore races against time to spend $641 million in COVID relief funds](https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/tick-tock-baltimore-facing-race-against-clock-to-spend-covid-relief-funds-thiru-vignarajah-mayor-brandon-scott-sheila-dixon-office-of-recovery-programs-public-works)

Baltimore City is in a race against the clock to spend $641 million in COVID relief money. The one-time gift from the federal government came with a time crunch; all of the money must be obligated by the end of 2024 and spent by the end of 2026 -- and if the city doesn’t use it, they lose it.

Last week, during a hearing in front of the city council, the mayor’s Chief Recovery Officer admitted slow spending amid a fast-approaching deadline is cause for concern.

“It’s a lot of money that has to be moved in a short period of time,” said Shamiah Kerney, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Programs, “The obligation deadline is for sure going to be a challenge.”

"Obligations" means the money has been formally assigned and approved by the Board of Estimates. Three years into the program, the city is only halfway there, with $324 million obligated. Additionally, at $183.4 million, the city has only spent 29% of the funding.

“Baltimore City ranks very low when it comes to actually spending federal relief funds,” said taxpayer advocate David Willaims.

According to Williams, the lack of spending shows a lack of leadership inside city hall.

“Starting with the mayor all the way down to the city council. Everyone is to blame here,” he said, “They’re going to be in such a rush to obligate this money that is going to be spent in areas that it shouldn't be spent on.”

In addition to the pace at which the money is being spent, Mayor Scott’s political challengers are also challenging his pledged spending priorities.

“Completely frittered away to repay donors and developers and help improve your reelection chances,” said mayoral candidate and former federal prosecutor Thiru Vignarajah.

Under general city services, the mayor allocated $6.4 million to the police department for new patrol cars, $5 million to the Department of Public Works for new garbage trucks, and $9 million for infrastructure improvements. Of which, only $2.5 million has actually been spent. What’s pledged also only accounts for about 3% of the budget.

Meanwhile, dozens of nonprofits across the city are slated to receive $43 million and have already spent $23 million, twice the funding and ten times the spending.

“The Walters art museum and the BMA, incredible institutions,” said Vignarajah, “Also intuitions that have some of the most affluent board of directors in America.”

The $641 million is one of the few positives to come out of the pandemic, but critics argue the mayor’s spending has been short-sighted and self-serving.

“That’s the biggest shame of this all is that this was used more as a political tool, rather than a way to help people in Baltimore city,” said Williams.

[Sun: Baltimore mayoral candidates trade barbs on crime, city services during forum](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/03/04/baltimore-mayoral-candidates-trade-barbs-on-crime-city-services-during-forum/)

The top four Democratic candidates for Baltimore mayor pulled no punches Monday night as they sparred over their plans to address crime and improve the delivery of city services during the first forum that drew all the city’s leading candidates.

Former prosecutor Thiru Vignarajah and businessman Bob Wallace, on the other hand, drew upon their lack of time in office, making the case for themselves as change agents prepared to deliver a new perspective.

“If you combine the time Brandon and Sheila have been in city government, it’s over 40 years,” said Wallace, who is running this year as a Democrat after a bid in 2020 as an independent. “If they were going to solve these problems, they would have solved them over 40 years.”

Karsonya “Kaye” Whitehead, a Loyola University Maryland professor and host of a local radio show who moderated Monday’s forum, drilled down on the candidates’ plans to combat crime but also their thoughts on how to dismantle the perception of crime.

Wallace and Vignarajah argued for more aggressive recruitment of city police officers. Wallace said he wanted to see military veterans offered an accelerated program to become police officers. Vignarajah said recruits need to be local, more diverse and potentially professionals with college degrees.

The candidates were critical of Scott when they were asked about their plans to improve the delivery of city services.

Weekly recycling service was scaled back to biweekly for more than two years under Scott’s leadership amid staffing shortages and increased quantities of recyclables being placed curbside. Scott announced last month that collection would resume in the first week of March and held a news conference Monday morning to tout the return of the service.

Vignarajah said the unaddressed grime on Baltimore’s streets begets first drug dealing and then violent crime.

“All of these things are connected,” he said. “It is a marker of whether a community is doing well or whether it’s failing.”

Perhaps the most pointed questions of the evening came from the audience, which was encouraged to write queries on notecards to be read by Whitehead. Of Scott, one attendee asked how he can be trusted to be mayor when he “sold” the city’s conduit system to Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. Last year, Scott pushed through a deal that makes BGE responsible for maintaining the 700-mile underground system. The agreement was approved during an unconventional vote of the Board of Estimates in which two members sat out in protest.

[WJZ: Thiru Vignarajah announces second bid for Baltimore mayor, fourth run for office](https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/thiru-vignarajah-baltimore-city-mayor-campaign/)

Thiru Vignarajah, a former city and federal prosecutor who once served as Maryland's deputy attorney general, filed to run as a Democrat for Baltimore City Mayor a second time.

Vignarajah's campaign announcement focused on signature issues including free college, reducing property taxes and Harborplace, which is under a redevelopment process.

The candidate will expand upon his announcement in a press conference Wednesday morning outside City Hall.

Vignarajah, the son of two Baltimore City public schools teachers, is a Woodlawn High graduate who attended undergrad at Yale University before receiving his law degree from Harvard Law School. During his time in law school, he was president of the Harvard Law Review and clerked for Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer.

After cutting his teeth as a federal prosecutor, Vignarajah became chief of major investigations for the Baltimore City State's Attorney's Office, and in 2015 he was appointed deputy attorney general of Maryland. Afterward, he went into private practice as a litigation partner for the DLA Piper law firm. He is now

More recently, Vignarajah spearheaded litigation by city residents last year against BGE's installment of external gas regulators. He also made public appearances in 2022 advocating for the rights of the owners of bars and strip clubs located on "The Block," challenging an effort to impose a curfew on those establishments' hours of operation.

[WBAL: Candidates for Baltimore mayor jump in water, speak at youth summit](https://www.wbal.com/candidates-for-baltimore-mayor-jump-in-water-speak-at-youth-summit/)

Democratic candidate Thiru Vignarajah jumped into the Inner Harbor on Friday, promising to do it again if he doesn’t follow through on his environmental goals during his first 60 days in office.

Vignarajah is pledging to make the city more eco-friendly by signing an executive order to prohibit the construction of residential buildings around the Inner Harbor and terminating the contract with Wheelabrator, which operates the incinerator in Baltimore’s Westport neighborhood.

Additionally, Vignarajah said he would seek to introduce legislation to forbid natural gas and fossil fuels in new buildings by July 2026.

“It’s already law in Montgomery County, it’s already law in Washington, D.C. We’re going to do the same thing in Baltimore City. Now, (Baltimore Gas and Electric) is not going to be happy because they would love to double down on this commitment for gas infrastructure and fossil fuels that are destroying our planet. But I don’t answer to BGE. I answer to the people of Baltimore,” Vignarajah said.

Vignarajah also promised to create two free bus routes and comply with an Environmental Protection Agency order to provide $2 million for sewage cleanup.

[Banner: Vignarajah’s mayoral campaign qualifies for $450,000 in public funding](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/vignarajah-mayor-public-funding-YWYRUUKHXZBADO66LJK5I6ALIM/)

Thiru Vignarajah’s mayoral campaign has collected enough small donations to qualify for $450,610 from Baltimore’s public campaign finance fund, positioning him to air TV ads, conduct polls and financially compete in the Democratic primary.

The city’s Fair Election Fund matches and multiplies donations to candidates who eschew contributions larger than $150 and refuse money from unions and PACs. Mayoral candidates who receive at least 500 small donations from city residents totaling $40,000 are eligible for the fund.

The public financing program uses a formula to match donations for citywide campaigns. Baltimore matches $9 for each of the first $25 donated — so a $25 donation earns a $225 match. After $25, the match decreases on a sliding scale until the maximum $150 donation. Qualifying mayoral candidates also receive a one-time $200,000 boost.

Vignarajah’s campaign reported receiving 500 qualifying donations totaling $53,120 to the Maryland State Board of Elections. According to paperwork filed by state officials on Thursday, the campaign is eligible to receive $250,610 in matched and multiplied donations, as well as the $200,000 boost.

“For the first time, Baltimore will have a candidate for Mayor who is fueled by people, not developers, lobbyists, PACs, and corporations,” Vignarajah said in a statement.

His new sum is a solid figure. It exceeds those reported in mid-January by two of his competitors in the Democratic primary: Former Mayor Sheila Dixon reporting having about $370,000 on hand, while businessman Bob Wallace reported having $230,000. Mayor Brandon Scott reported $835,000 on hand.

Money isn’t everything. But running a race with little cash means a candidate won’t be able to conduct polls, which often informs the campaign on strategy, such as which voting blocks to target, and message, or air TV ads and send mailers, which may capture voters and sell a candidate’s story and agenda.

The cash infusion means Vignarajah may now be able to appeal more directly to voters. In a race as competitive as this year’s primary, where some polls have Scott and Dixon in a statistical dead heat, every vote matters.

The Fair Election Fund was born after city lawmakers passed a bill supporting the policy in 2019, saying it would reduce the effect of big money and powerful donors in Baltimore politics. Vignarajah is the first mayoral campaign to qualify for the program. The maximum public contribution to a mayoral campaign is $1.5 million.

[Sun: Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah qualifies for public funding, to receive initial $450K](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/03/22/baltimore-mayoral-thiru-vignarajah-campaign-funding/)

Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah has qualified for public financing to assist his campaign, giving him $450,000 in public funds as he and the rest of the mayoral field enter the final stretch ahead of the Democratic primary May 14.

Vignarajah, who is vying to oust Democratic Mayor Brandon Scott, is the first mayoral candidate to hit the qualifying mark, which requires participating candidates to receive at least 500 donations from city residents of no more than $150 each, totaling at least $40,000.

Reaching that threshold qualified Vignarajah, a former prosecutor, for a $200,000 one-time boost in public funds. Additional matching funds are also set to be paid out to Vignarajah, making the total he will receive thus far $450,610, according to a letter sent by the Maryland State Board of Elections to Vignarajah’s campaign Thursday.

The fair election fund, which is available for the first time to city candidates this year, pays out matching funds based on a ratio for money raised beyond the first $40,000. Vignarajah could potentially receive up to $1.7 million in public funding, although he would need hundreds more small-dollar donations to achieve that. A candidate can accept no more than $150 from each donor.

The total amount Vignarajah has on hand is not required to be reported until April 9. He has said publicly he expects his campaign to cost at least $1 million. A past candidate for mayor and Baltimore state’s attorney, Vignarajah has been a prolific fundraiser in the past, raising numerous high-dollar contributions from well-known donors and benefitting from PACs. Candidates using public financing cannot take money from campaign committees or PACs.

In a news release Friday, Vignarajah cast himself as an anti-establishment candidate.

“For the first time, Baltimore will have a candidate for mayor who is fueled by people, not developers, lobbyists, PACs, and corporations,” he said.

The 2024 election cycle marks the first time that Vignarajah and others are able to tap public resources for campaign purposes in Baltimore. The money, distributed by the Baltimore City Fair Election Fund, became available following the approval of a ballot question in 2018. That question, favored by 75% of voters, authorized the creation of the fund, which now has been financed primarily from the city’s budget. Grants and donations are accepted, too.

The fund operates by matching donations, so candidates must raise their own money to take money from the fund. They are limited, however, in how much they can raise. A candidate can accept no more than $150 from each donor, and donors need to be city residents for a candidate to receive matching funds.

After the boost, funds are matched based on a ratio spelled out by the Baltimore City Fair Election Fund. The first $25 of each contribution is matched with $9 for every $1. The next $50 is matched on a $5-to-$1 ratio. Any money over $75 is matched on a $2-to-$1 ratio. For every $150 donation made after the qualification boost, mayoral candidates stand to receive $625 in public funds.

[Baltimore Fishbowl: Mayoral candidates on the issues: the environment](https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/mayoral-candidates-on-the-issues-the-environment/)

During an unseasonably warm Friday morning in March, Thiru Vignarajah jumped into the Baltimore Harbor.

Vignarajah, who is running for mayor in the upcoming primary election, admitted to reporters and a small crowd of supporters that the jump was a political stunt.

“Of course it’s a gimmick, but it’s a gimmick with a purpose,” he said, pledging to jump in the harbor again 60 days into his term, if elected, should he fail to fulfill his campaign pledges on the environment.

Vignarajah was looking to make a splash in a crowded field of mayoral candidates, which include Mayor Brandon Scott and former Mayor Sheila Dixon, vying to lead the city next January. Baltimore’s mayor will lead the city as it navigates the effects of a warming climate, elevated asthma rates, and developing more sustainable infrastructure.

Vignarajah pledged to break the city’s contract with the Wheelabrator waste-to-energy incinerator, a contract he contended is invalid because it was not subject to competitive bidding, nor does it comply with the Baltimore Clean Air Act.

“An incinerator with Baltimore emblazoned on a smokestack should not be the enduring symbol of our city,” he said.

The city’s health department reported that 33 percent of high school students have been “told by a doctor or nurse that they had asthma.” Asthma cases for high schools are nearly 26 percent statewide. Asthma rates for adults in Baltimore hover around 13 percent, compared to 9 percent statewide and nationally, according to the agency.

Scott, when campaigning for mayor in 2020, opposed the incinerator, but reversed course after securing the Democratic nomination, according to the Baltimore Brew. The mayor also signed a 10-year contract extension, the one Vignarajah has in his crosshairs.

Before jumping into the harbor, Vignarajah also promised to introduce legislation banning gas hook-ups for new construction beginning in 2026, following the lead of Washington D.C., Montgomery County and other jurisdictions. He also pledged to further help residents with sewage back-up cleaning, and comply with a consent decree ordering financial assistance to residents.

Vignarajah told reporters he plans to expand the city’s free circulator buses and add two new routes, should he win.

[Twitter: Statement from Thiru Vignarajah on Tragic Collapse of Key Bridge](https://twitter.com/thiru4baltimore/status/1772606998078505121)

We rose this morning to learn of the horrific tragedy of the collapse of the Key Bridge. Let us start our day with prayers for those still missing and gratitude for the first responders who raced to locate and rescue them and are still at work.

It was just last week that the Key Bridge celebrated its 47th anniversary of opening. But steel can be repaired and bridges can be rebuilt. It is the families of those directly affected who remain at the center of our prayers this morning. There is much to learn and much to do in the hours and months ahead. Our history teaches us that after tragedy we rebuild. We have done it before, and we will do it again.

Again, may we pray for those in peril and remain hopeful for the sake of their loved ones.

[Banner: Officers joke at BGE protest, body camera video shows](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/police-body-cameras-capture-officers-at-bge-protests-2IK7IRLSSNDCZCS5OR334JWRNA/?schk=YES&rchk=YES&utm_source=The+Baltimore+Banner&utm_campaign=a5534bbdc4-NL_ALRT_BA_20240403_2008&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-d8395a2778-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D&mc_cid=a5534bbdc4)

New police body camera footage obtained by Baltimore mayoral candidate Thiru Vignarajah captures police joking about detaining protestors at a June demonstration against Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. that ended in arrests.

When the utility company announced plans to install gas regulators on the outside of people’s homes, residents in several neighborhoods decried the idea, including some Baltimoreans who were arrested when they demonstrated against the company outside installations at Federal Hill rowhomes. Baltimore City State’s Attorney Ivan Bates dropped the charges in August.

In September, the Maryland Public Service Commission sided with the residents and ruled that they could choose whether BGE installed external regulators at their homes.

With the mayoral primary looming less than a month and a half away, Vignarajah said the footage represents “a mayor that responds to BGE reflexively and ignores the rest of the city.”

The lawyer, who formerly served as Deputy Attorney General of Maryland and worked as a prosecutor in the State’s Attorney’s Office, led a class action suit against BGE and represented the arrested protestors.

Scott made headlines when he approved a controversial deal with the utility provider over access to the city-owned underground conduit. That 2023 deal did not have much to do with external regulators.

The mayor is not depicted and not heard from in the footage. The video includes a snippet of Councilman Eric Costello, who represents Federal Hill, telling an officer he spoke with Scott, City Administrator Faith Leach and Senate President Bill Ferguson.

“What’s going to happen is, we’re going to send someone up here from MONSE [the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement] and they’re gonna come talk to these folks and say, ‘You gotta move. If you don’t move, here’s what the consequences are going to be,’” the Democrat said.

Scott said he did not recall the conversation with Costello. “We often send folks [to protests] to have conversations, because we believe in people’s right to protest,” he said.

MONSE is the mayor’s flagship public safety program; staffers often perform conflict mediation at sites and are known for their gun violence and homicide prevention work.

Costello did not respond to a request for comment. After the protests, he sponsored city legislation to ban external regulators in Baltimore.

Police in the footage appear both frustrated that the protestors refuse to step aside and bemused to be on the scene at all. They repeatedly tell protestors that “arrests will commence if you do not clear the area,” while privately joking to each other: “Baltimore police have nothing better to do!”

“You’re trying to stop them from doing something that’s illegal,” one officer said of the protestors. “Come on, let me help you. Let’s get serious.”

The officer added: “They’re probably right. You don’t have the lawyers or the pockets to go against them. This is a Fortune 500 company, they have billions of dollars in assets. They will bury you before you get anywhere.”

After hours of back and forth between BGE workers, police, and the protestors, BPD officers eventually handcuffed and arrested three women. “What is telling is the level of comfort BGE has pulling the strings of municipal government,” Vignarajah said.

Vignarajah aired about 20 minutes of footage from the full six hours of obtained video at a news conference Wednesday. In one snippet, as he speaks with BGE attorney David Ralph via speakerphone, Vignarajah informs Ralph that a police officer wearing a body camera is capturing their exchange. “Do you need me to turn my camera off, sir?” an officer asks.