

## **Letter to the Editor**

Wednesday, July 14, 2010

### **A step in the wrong direction**

Contract concessions unnecessary, costly in tight times

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Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposal to assuage union employees' anger over furloughs and pay freezes is counterproductive to broad efforts that seek to change the way elected leaders interact with county workers.

In June, after another round of contract negotiations were forced when the County Council voted on a budget that did not fund some benefits, like retirement increases for salary raises that were never granted, Leggett agreed to a grab bag of goodies for county workers. The perks included 26 hours of compensation time for police and government employees, 48 hours of compensation time for firefighters, the removal of a plan for random drug testing of public safety employees and \$135,000 in tuition assistance for police.

The concessions are needed, according to Leggett, as part of a balanced approach in dealing with unions that represent thousands of employees. These measures are relatively inexpensive, help maintain a positive relationship with workers and sustain morale.

There's some degree of truth in that — the value of a motivated workforce should not be dismissed and Leggett understands that.

But the county's relationship with its unionized workers has been dysfunctional for years. That's made perfectly clear by the fact that even now union leaders are playing hardball in pushing for these extra benefits.

While one of Leggett's greatest strengths lies in his ability to conciliate, now is not the time. The county is coming off one of its toughest budget cycles in memory, having trimmed nearly \$1 billion to make ends meet. Much of that came on the backs of county workers who have enjoyed more-than-competitive salaries and off-the-charts benefits for decades.

Elected leaders, including Leggett, are making inroads with an unprecedented push toward more fiscal conservatism in Montgomery, with an ongoing study of the county's structural deficit, revisions to its reserve policy and newfound strength in dealing with unions.

By offering these concessions, Leggett is sending a signal that the old relationship — the one where county workers enjoyed a 96 percent salary increase from 1999 to 2009 — has a chance of returning.

It doesn't. Just as private sector employees have had to adjust to a new normal in the economy, so will those employed by the county. With the fiscal pressures that Montgomery will encounter in coming years, there's simply no room for feel-good measures that could reduce service for residents already reeling from unemployment, higher taxes and lower wages.

Leggett's offerings have sent the wrong message and are a step in the wrong direction for a county that is facing severe, systemic budget problems.