

Volunteer firefighters negotiate with county over ambulance fees

By Rachel Baye, Staff Writer, *The Washington Examiner*. Published: July 31, 2012

Montgomery County's volunteer firefighters are negotiating with lawmakers before making a final decision on whether to oppose the county's ambulance fee, a volunteer fire and rescue official said Tuesday.

"We are continuing to talk with the [county] executive and council members and see if we can come up with a commonality on improving relations and at the same time moving forward and collecting the signatures," said Eric Bernard, executive director of the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association.

The volunteer firefighters have been collecting signatures on a petition to get the ambulance fee on the November ballot as a referendum question. Bernard said he doesn't know how many signatures have been collected so far.

The talks are aimed at preventing the lingering animosity that occurred after the volunteers collected enough signatures on a referendum petition to get the ambulance fee on the November 2010 ballot. Career firefighters are backing the fee, while volunteer firefighters are pushing to have it defeated. Both sides have accused each other of campaigning for their position while on-duty.

"There were threats about career people would be fired if this didn't pass, this budget would be cut, that budget would be cut," Bernard said. "[We're] just trying to the best of our ability to keep it out of the fire house."

Depending on how those talks go, he said, the firefighters may drop efforts to get the ambulance fee on the ballot.

Patrick Lacefield, spokesman for County Executive Ike Leggett, also declined to discuss the talks.

The volunteer firefighters don't have much time before they have to decide. They need 15,546 valid county voter signatures by Aug. 11 and another 15,546 by Aug. 26.

When the ambulance fee was on the November 2010 ballot, 54 percent of voters rejected it. But the County Council -- at Leggett's urging -- passed a new version in May.

"If the volunteers decided not to take it to referendum, I would understand because of what happened [in May] when the County Council and the county executive disregarded the result of the [November 2010] referendum," said County Councilman and vocal ambulance fee opponent Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville.

If the measure is not overturned, the county will charge people about \$400 to \$800 for each ambulance trip. County officials who back the fee say it will be paid most of the time by insurance companies. If passed, the fee will raise \$16 million when it goes into effect in fiscal 2014, supporters said.

