

Pay for critical needs with one-time windfall

How would you spend a one-time windfall of cash? Would you replace that old furnace in your home that can't quite keep up anymore when it gets cold? Or, would you hire a cook?

Most people would agree that you should replace that old furnace. After a year of paying your chef, your windfall would be exhausted and you'd be back slaving over that hot stove yourself. You'd be grateful for the stove's heat, though, because that old furnace would probably be kaput.

Montgomery County is facing a similar choice. The county recently learned that the hot real estate market provided us with a windfall of \$71.5 million above what was projected for the last fiscal year, primarily in transfer and recordation tax. So, the question now is: does the county put the money into badly needed improvements in its infrastructure and critical Information Technology (IT) systems or roll the cash into an ever-growing operating budget?

One-time money should be spent on one-time projects. In that vein, the County Council voted in mid-December to set aside \$23.8 million to fund improvements for our infrastructure and for upgrading several critical county IT systems.

It's no secret that the county's infrastructure has been declining in recent years. That's why last February, the council president asked me to lead a task force to take a hard look at our infrastructure backlogs, namely, road resurfacing, sidewalk repairs, street lighting, park improvements and the like.

What the Infrastructure Task Force learned was that for years, critical county facilities and infrastructure have been eroding at an alarming rate, thanks to benign neglect. For instance, there are 1,000 outstanding work orders for maintenance of our parks. Our transportation department won't catch up with its road repaving backlog for 10 years. Even the \$6.9 million the council added to last year's budget for infrastructure improvements was just a small down payment on all that we need to do.

Part of that \$23.8 million the council set aside last month will also target a less visible, but equally critical need. At least several county IT systems are at imminent risk of failing. In April, the Council's Manage-

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ment and Fiscal Policy Committee met with the five county agencies to review the health of our IT systems. We learned that several systems, absolutely crucial to running the government, are being held together with little more than chewing gum and rubber bands, and the good work of longtime county employees who know how to fix them.

The IT system the county uses to pay vendors and employees — the very heart of our finance system — is more than 11 years old and can only be repaired when it breaks by county employees who know the old computer language it uses. When those employees retire and these systems break, we risk being unable to cut checks to vendors or paychecks to our employees.

We have also known for some time that our county Health and Human and Services (HHS) Department can't provide even some of the most basic information about the people that use its services. Child Welfare's computers don't talk to those in Income Support, or to those in Victim Services, and so on. Until recently, HHS had 130 different computer programs to track clients. Even now, HHS is unable to track key information to determine whether programs are successful, or even if the same people are served by multiple programs.

So it seems abundantly clear where we should spend the county's one-time windfall — on critical infrastructure needs, including critical IT systems, which have long been neglected. There is another good reason for spending one-time money on one-time projects — putting windfall money into recurring costs will only drive up the county budget for years to come and lead to a bottom line that, simply put, is unsustainable.

The moral of the story is that without new furnace heating our home, any food our new cook serves up will be cold fare indeed.

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