

Labor costs drive county budget

80% of \$4 billion tab goes to salaries and benefits

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With a county budget that has grown 84 percent over the past 10 years, many in Montgomery County are talking about where it all goes.

The County Council is considering a \$4 billion budget for the coming fiscal year, a figure that's up a little more than 7 percent over this year's spending. Analysts say 80 percent of that money will go to pay salaries and benefits.

"Bottom line of the budget is based on salaries, and the salaries are bloated and the unions rule the county," said Marc Barinbaum, a member of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League.

That kind of attack is inaccu-

rate and "irresponsible," said Gino Renne, president of Montgomery County Government Employees Organization. "Our employees can't afford to live in the county which they serve," he said. "Everybody wants to have good services. Nobody wants to pay for it."

Very few of the workers he represents can support a household without help, he said. "The bare minimum, just for survival in Montgomery County, is \$66,000 for a family of four."

The county's office professional and technology workers, totaling 4,000, earn an annual average of \$52,000, said organization president Gino Renne. Service Labor and Trade Union members earn around \$45,000.

Workers in all departments are having trouble with the cost of living, said County Council Member Phil Andrews, D-District 3.

The council is considering work force housing legislation that would

provide assistance to a family of four earning as much as \$88,000 a year. Most union-represented employees could qualify.

Police recruit salaries start at \$40,386 and firefighters start at \$37,714. Of the school system's \$2 billion budget, 89 percent goes to pay salaries and benefits for its 21,000 employees, including 10,000 teachers.

"A fundamental part of our strategy has been investing in our work force," spokesman Brian Edwards said.

Starting salary for teachers is listed as \$40,542. The average teacher, however, starts at \$43,000 a year, he said, because teachers come to the county with an average three-years' experience.

Union contracts for the police and county employees are up for review June 30, but Renne said they will likely delay negotiations until a new county executive takes office next year.

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