

# County council OKs budget

\$3.9 billion to be formally approved late next week

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ROCKVILLE — In a straw vote Thursday, the Montgomery County Council unanimously approved a \$3.9-billion operating budget for fiscal 2007, touting programs for residents throughout the county.

The council is scheduled to formally approve the budget May 25.

The budget includes a property tax cut from 95 to 90 cents per \$100 of assessed value. County homeowners will also receive a credit of \$221 on their property tax bill, compared with \$116 last year.

An additional tax credit will give homeowners with incomes less than \$64,000 more relief based on the first \$300,000 of their homes' assessed values. This tax relief would average \$804 per household for those eligible, four times the current average credit.

Councilman Phil Andrews, who represents Gaithersburg and Rockville, pointed out that this is the third year in a row that the council has reduced the property tax rate.

The council also approved a six-year capital budget of \$1.3 billion, a 25 percent increase compared with the previous capital program. It fully funds the school system's capital budget request and includes money for transportation and new fire and police stations.

Council President George Leventhal said the priorities were met because the economy is strong, but Marilyn Praisner, the council's vice president, cautioned her colleagues about optimistic assumptions of economic indicators.

"The budget includes a lot of good things," she said. "But we need to look beyond today and continue to monitor the indicators to see if they continue to be as rosy."

Councilman Steven Silverman, who won't be on the council after this year because he's run-

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# County

ning for county executive, said the budget is extraordinary for education, both for personnel, and building and modernizing schools.

The budget, which goes into effect July 1, earmarks \$2.2 billion for public education, including \$1.85 billion for public schools, a \$137 million — or 7.4 percent — increase.

The council also plugged a \$17-million gap that County Executive Doug Duncan's recommended budget left when the state refused to fund some education expenses.

Some of the budget's highlights include:

- expansion of full-day kindergarten to the remaining 30 elementary schools that don't have it.

- after-school programs for all

middle schools.

- money for five new schools due to open in the fall, including Clarksburg High School and Great Seneca Creek, Little Bennett, Down County Consortium No. 27 and Roscoe Nix elementary schools.

- a \$38-million increase for Montgomery College, which will enable the college to keep tuition the same next year — the first time without an increase since 1984. The college will also be able to continue its plans to build a new Bioscience Education Center at the Germantown campus and a new Science Center at Rockville.

- \$400,000 to begin work on a new Poolesville High School magnet program.

- \$13.2 million to improve pension benefits for teachers and nonteacher employees.

- funding for 10 new teacher

positions for English for Speakers of Other Languages classes.

- \$16 million for a new north county bus maintenance depot.

- \$2 million to increase Ride On bus service.

- \$3 million for staffing and operating the interim Clarksburg fire station.

- 56 new police officer and non-sworn positions.

- \$3.2 million to implement a speed camera enforcement program.

- \$93,000 to strengthen juvenile prosecutions by the State's Attorney Office.

- \$260,000 for the Gang Prevention Initiative.

- \$1.2 million for homelessness emergency services grant.

- a \$335,160 increase, to \$1.3 million, for the African American Health Initiative.

- a \$245,000 increase, to \$1.1

million, for the Latino Health Initiative.

- a \$200,000 increase, to \$620,000, for the Asian Health Initiative.

- \$310,000 in startup funds to establish a county sobering center.

- \$90,000 for Food & Friends delivery of food to clients with HIV/AIDS.

- \$100,000 for electronic beds for the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington.

- \$200,000 for the Jewish Federation of Group Homes for a central activity and education center.

- \$1.5 million for information systems and technology improvements for the Park and Planning Department as part of post-Clarksburg reforms.