

MONTGOMERY NOTEBOOK

Leggett Seeks to Exceed Charter Limit on Taxes

By ANN E. MARIMOW
and ERNESTO LONDOÑO
Washington Post Staff Writers

At his morning budget briefing this week, County Executive **Isiah Leggett** (D) was surrounded by somber-faced top aides as he presented an austere spending plan that confronts the county's underlying structural gap between revenue and spending.

Leggett recommended that the County Council vote to exceed the county's charter limit on property tax revenue, raising the average rate by 8 percent or 7.5 cents — the largest increase since 1988. He also laid out plans for a new ambulance fee that would bill an individual's insurance company for emergency services.

To shrink the workforce, about 1,000 county employees would be offered an early retirement package with a \$25,000 cash incentive. Budget writers expect about 100 workers

to accept the offer. Of those jobs, about 50 would not be filled; another 175 positions would be slated for elimination.

Chief Administrative Officer **Timothy Firestine** said he anticipates that the county "will be able to manage without anybody hitting the street who doesn't want to go."

Reaction from the council was reserved Monday as members began digesting the thick budget book. County Council President **Michael Knapp** (D-Upcounty) predicted that the council would probably break the property tax limit, something it has done only three times in the past 17 years.

"We're going to have to exceed the charter limit," Knapp said after Leggett's briefing. "But it's incumbent for us to explain why."

He cast doubt on passage of Leggett's proposed cuts in public safety, pointing to a recent county survey that showed residents consider edu-

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Proposed Tax Hike Biggest Since 1988

education and public safety their top priorities. He said if officials had to choose between keeping libraries open Sundays and funding anti-gang programs, he would be inclined to "err on the side of public safety."

Council member **Duohy Trachtenberg** (D-At Large) expressed skepticism about a property tax increase on top of rising prices for gas, electric bills and a shrinking job market.

"I'm concerned about the burden of a tax hike," she said in a statement Tuesday. "How much can you squeeze out of working families? The proposed tax increase may be too much, too soon."

Council member **Phil Andrews** (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) raised the issue of county employee salaries and benefits that are set to rise 4.5 percent, in addition to a 3.5 percent raise tied to years of service. When residents are being asked to pay more in taxes and to withstand cuts in services, he said it "would be wrong to leave untouched" such pay increases. "I think we need to ask them to help."

Candidates for the special election in District 4 also weighed in. Democrat **Nancy Navarro**, speaking in her role as school board president, called the budget a "measured proposal." In a joint statement with board Vice President **Shirley Brandman**, she noted that the system's budget "already directed significant savings to be used to fund next year's budget" and pledged goodwill in working with Leggett and the council.

Democrat **Don Praisner**, widower of the late **Marilyn Praisner**, who held the District 4 seat for many years, called for thinking beyond taxes, cuts and staff reductions to balance the budget. He recommended establishing a labor-management cooperation program that would rely on front line county workers to identify savings through more efficient practices. He also identified a federal grant that would pay to explore the creation of such a program.

Praisner, who is retired from the CIA, said, "We must reach out to our county employees today, hear and respect what they have to say, and allow them to make a contribution to protecting the county programs and services we all care about."

Less reserved was the reaction from the county Republican Party.

Robert Dyer, a member of the Montgomery County Republican Party Central Committee, called Leggett's "massive property tax increase" an "all-out assault on senior citizens and working families. To even propose raising property taxes is simply outrageous."

Dyer did not mention that Leggett's proposal includes a \$1,014 credit for a homeowner's primary residence. Residents with homes assessed at the low end would pay a little less in property taxes. The bill for a home assessed for \$220,000, for instance,

would drop 4.7 percent from \$1,193 to \$1,137.

Residents with homes assessed at the median \$350,000 and above, however, would see an increase ranging from 5.6 to 15.7 percent for a home assessed for \$1.1 million.

Dyer went on to say that the May 13 special election for the District 4 seat will be a referendum on the "council's tax-and-spend legacy," and he urged voters to support **Mark Fennel** or **John McKinnis**, both Republican candidates.

More GOP Candidates in District 4

Two more GOP candidates have signed up for the District 4 primary contest in advance of Monday's filing deadline. **Thomas Hardman**, an IT developer and a past board member of the Aspen Hill Civic Association, ran unsuccessfully for delegate two years ago in District 19.

Hardman, 49, said he would bring hands-on community experience to the council from his work on "quality of life" issues.

Robert Patton, a former Peace Corps volunteer, said he would provide a moderately libertarian approach to the council, which he said is needed to change the perception that the county is an "overly regulatory jurisdiction."

Instead of rhetoric about "slow growth," Patton said, he would preserve open space by changing zoning laws to allow agricultural businesses, for instance, to more easily operate in residential areas and reduce "bureaucratic nightmares" in the planning process.

An athletic fields specialist for his family's Turf Center Lawns, Patton, 33, said he would propose a \$1,200 property tax credit for families who send their children to private schools as an incentive to reduce public school crowding. He also calls for abolishing the liquor control department and the county's role in distributing alcohol.

Back to State's Attorney's Office

Thomas M. DeGonia II, who recently left the Montgomery County State's Attorney's office for the greener pastures of private practice, was recently asked to temporarily step back into his old shoes — to prosecute a prosecutor.

This is how it happened: Wicomico County State's Attorney **Davis R. Ruark**, 52, was arrested Feb. 22 in Ocean City and charged with driving under the influence of alcohol and being in possession of a registered firearm while under the influence. **Joel J. Todd**, the top prosecutor in Worcester County, which is adjacent to Wicomico, is close to Ruark, raising a potential conflict of interest.

The Office of the Maryland State Prosecutor couldn't step in because it specializes in public corruption. The attorney general's office also couldn't do it because it handles removal from office and impeachment proceedings — potential ramifications of prosecutions of elected officials. So Todd turned to the defense bar.

"I'm flattered that I was asked to do it," said DeGonia, a former senior assistant state's attorney in Montgomery who is an associate in the Rockville office of Venable LLP. DeGonia will be paid by the Worcester State's Attorney's Office and will get a free trip to Ocean City. No trial date has been set.

Staff writer **Mivanda S. Spiveack** contributed to this report.