

Council ponders employee raises

■ Firefighters contract faces vote as members weigh tight budget

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With Montgomery County facing a \$297 million shortfall, some County Council members are expressing concerns about how much county employees make and how the county will pay for it.

County Executive Ishah Leggett signed off early this year on a firefighters contract that would increase their pay 28 percent over three years even as he urged County Council members of a budget crisis for fiscal 2009 and called for a property tax rate hike that exceeds the county charter limit.

"Given the tough economic times we're in ... we need to keep increases around the inflation rate instead of above it," said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg. "These are not affordable in these times. It's more than is needed to recruit and retain workers."

The three-year contract puts most of the increase in the third year — which coincides with an election year, said Andrews, chairman of the Public Safety Committee.

International Association of Firefighters Local 1694 President John Sparks did not return calls for comment.

Employee wages and benefits make up 60 percent of the county's operating budget and is one of the few places where the county can save money, Andrews said.

When the county council votes on the contract in the next few weeks, Andrews said he intends to vote against it and urge his fellow council members to do so as well.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, chairwoman of the Management and Fiscal Policy Committee, said she had not reviewed the firefighters' contract yet and had not decided on it.

But Trachtenberg has called for a "good black and white description" of how much employee salaries, health benefits and pay raises are going to cost the county as it faces the budget crisis.

"It's very important that we have the bottom line and we have a sense of how we're going to pay for the wages and the cost of living increases over the next few years," said Trachtenberg (D-At Large) of North Bethesda. "The problems we're going to face are not for one year only."

Trachtenberg said the contracts with county employees should be honored.

"But I'm suggesting we need to identify what we're going to

pay in these contracts and how we're going to pay for them," she said.

Leggett has proposed a mix of fees, a property tax increase, and job reductions to balance the budget. His property tax increase would average a 6 percent increase for the average homeowner, a move that would exceed the county's charter limit and would require seven out of nine council members to approve to pass the budget.

"I do not support going over the charter limit," Trachtenberg said.

She asked the council staff to prepare a detailed analysis of existing contracts and raises and the cost of future obligations from pensions and health benefits. Trachtenberg said she was concerned about the county's AAA bond rating, which the county has maintained for 35 years.

"We must be careful not to start down a path that will raise red flags in the bond market and have a deleterious effect on our long-term fiscal strength," she said.

Martin Wehman, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayer's League, said he thought Trachtenberg was taking the right fiscal steps for the county.

"Maybe she's gotten a little religion. She is going in the right direction because there's not enough money around," Wehman said. "She's trying to make an honest effort to try to balance things."

Trachtenberg did not say how she would balance the budget, but would instead rely on the analysis from the council staff to help determine what needed to be done.

"It's sort of like a household budget in my mind," she said. "If your income has gone down, you've got to cut expenses. I've made it very clear I respect the contributions made by our workers and I want to safeguard their retirement benefits, but we owe it to the entire community to have a transparent ... dialogue about what it costs."

After spending the past week going over the numbers with her staff, Trachtenberg said she thought it important to stress her opposition to busting the charter limits.

"I have mixed feelings," said Councilman Mark Elrich (D-At Large) of Takoma Park, who said he is inclined to support the firefighters' contract. "When you look at the pay overall, they're not overly paid."

What the county really needs to do is look at how different departments are organized and where they can be made more efficient.

"That's the real thing we're fighting," Elrich said.