

## Montgomery Budget Fails Preliminary Vote

*Panel Divided on Union Pacts, Taxes*

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Montgomery County Council members failed yesterday to pass a spending plan on a preliminary vote, deeply divided over changing labor union contracts and raising property taxes as they try to close a \$300 million shortfall.

Council President Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) had worked late into Wednesday night to try to broker a deal that would appeal to at least seven council members. But by late afternoon, the panel had reached a stalemate, rejecting a \$4.3 billion budget on a 4 to 4 vote. Council members are to return

to Rockville this morning to consider an alternative floated by Council member Phil Andrews (D-Rockville-Gaithersburg) that would force thousands of county employees to take two days of unpaid time off, saving the budget about \$20 million. His suggestion was met with a muted response from the otherwise vocal audience of government workers yesterday, but union leaders were cool to the idea.

"How can you furlough employees and say it's not a loss of wages?" asked John Sparks, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters, Local 1664.

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"Last time I heard, parents want more school, not less," said Benoit Cullison, president of the Montgomery County Education Association, which represents public school teachers.

The gridlock underscores the philosophical differences of the panel's eight Democrats. It marked the first time in at least 17 years, council aides said, that members missed a self-imposed date for a temperature-taking vote on the budget. The final vote is scheduled for Thursday.

"There are many different opinions on this council," Marc Ehrlich (D-At Large) said. "We need to cool down, step back and think."

Before the vote, council members agreed unanimously to restore about \$26 million in funding for a long list of programs that County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) had suggested trimming. For example, firefighters assigned to stations in Glen Echo and Laytonsville would continue to work nights and weekends, instead of being transferred to Gaithersburg and Kensington, and staffing would be restored for a Hillendale ladder truck.

The council would fund 12 community outreach officers and a 20-person police recruit class for January, both of which Leggett had slated for elimination. Knapp said the council rejected reductions that would have resulted in slower responses to emergencies.

"We are not going to lose ground. We are not going to backslide," he said.

As they informally reached consensus over which programs to fund, the more vexing unresolved question was how to pay for them.

Raising property tax revenue above the county's charter limit, which the council has signaled it intends to do, requires a supermajority of seven council members. With a vacancy on the nine-member council because of the death of Marilyn Praisner in February, two members could hold up the entire budget.

Andrews and Council member Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large) continued to press the case that county workers — in addition to taxpayers and service recipients — must participate in any solution. Trachtenberg invoked the words of Praisner, long viewed as a fiscal watchdog.

The night before Praisner's heart surgery that preceded her death, Trachtenberg said Praisner gave her a handwritten note: "Kid, do, in my absence, you must be the fiscal guardian of the council." Trachtenberg went on to say: "I have an obligation to represent all of the county's million residents, most of whom do not have a union card."

Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring) said: "I have a fundamental difference of opinion with those who would break contracts negotiated in good faith. . . . Our employees deserve better than that."

On Wednesday, council members voted 7 to 1 to reduce the property tax rate by two cents per \$100 of assessed value, but for a second day they did not tackle the issue of tax credits that will determine how much more homeowners pay in fiscal 2009. Ehrlich, the lone dissenting vote on the rate, continued to urge colleagues to back Leggett's approach. The county executive would raise the rate by 7.5 cents, the largest increase in two decades, but provide a large credit to soften

the increase on homeowners. When the council reconvenes this morning, debate will center on unpaid leave for workers. The

county last furloughed workers in 1992 for four days.

There was disagreement yesterday over the legality of such of

move. Union leaders insisted that it would violate labor agreements. Michael Faden, the council's senior legislative attorney, quoted the

county's collective bargaining law that allows management to "relieve employees from duties because of lack of work or funds."