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Wednesday, July 23, 2008

Montgomery seeks MACo support on teacher pensions

A down vote on slots could lead to a multimillion-dollar county burden, advocate warns

by Douglas Tallman | Staff Writer

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County Council members are looking for support from the Maryland Association of Counties even if Montgomery voters reject a slots referendum in November.

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MACo — a major voice for local government in Annapolis — has announced its support for legalizing slot machine gambling because of the money it will bring the state treasury. Legislative analysts predict the machines will generate about \$700 million a year.

But if Marylanders vote down the proposal, the General Assembly will have to balance the budget without that money. The money from the slot machines nearly balances the \$635.3 million the state contributes to counties to pay for the pensions of their teachers.

“We need to know MACo will fight for our teacher pension regardless of how we vote on slots,” said Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

Leventhal and the rest of the council met Tuesday with MACo President James T. Smith and David Bliden, its executive director.

Leventhal predicted that Montgomery voters would likely vote down the slots proposal, which would put 15,000 machines at five locations across the state.

Smith, county executive of Baltimore County, assured Leventhal the organization would fight for the aid.

“We will be aggressively resisting any change to the teacher pension, or any part of the teacher pension, that shifts to the local jurisdictions,” said Smith (D), whose MACo presidency ends this year.

Leventhal said the county needs pensions “decoupled” from the slots issue. Smith said he raised the possibility because “some in Annapolis” have made the connection. He later said he was referring to Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach.

During the recession of the early 1990s, the state made the counties pay teachers’ Social Security, Bliden said. But in the 1990s, lawmakers increased the maximum local income tax counties could levy on their residents.

No one has proposed a similar revenue source to cover the cost of teacher pensions. According to data collected by MACo, the pensions cost Montgomery County \$217.1 million or 15 cents on the property tax rate.

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