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County Budget Discussion: Cash-Poor But Clash-Rich

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Hurricane Ike made landfall at a County Council breakfast Tuesday, churning up debate over fiscal responsibility in his first meeting with council members in more than a month.

This being [Montgomery County](#), the tenor of the discussion was polite and no one pounded a fist at the breakfast table, but it was by far the most heated public exchange between County Executive [Isiah Leggett](#) (D) and the council to date.

Leggett called out council members for rejecting a long list of spending cuts during last year's budget debate, saying their actions had left him with few options for fiscal 2010. Budget writers are projecting a shortfall of about \$250 million.

"We have to get on the same page here in terms of reductions," Leggett said, contending that the council's practice has been to add, not cut, spending.

Council President [Michael Knapp](#) (D-Upcounty) looked baffled and said Leggett's assertion was off.

"If we're going to get on the same page, let's get on the same page," Knapp said. "If we want to cast aspersions across the table, that's fine."

Council members noted that 80 percent of the budget was essentially predetermined through labor contracts for employee salaries and benefits that Leggett's team had negotiated.

Although Leggett is sometimes hard to hear from across a table, his voice boomed with authority when he described the tough choices ahead.

"This is serous," he said after the meeting. "I wanted to lay out the realities as stark as possible."

Leggett and the council could both claim to be technically correct in the debate over who proposed to spend the most in fiscal 2009.

The council's total operating budget is \$15.7 million more than what Leggett recommended. Conversely, the council's approved "aggregate" operating budget, which includes money for capital projects, is \$5.6 million less than the executive's.

Maybe so, but Leggett's budget director, [Joseph Beach](#), said the aggregate budget is irrelevant and

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confuses the day-to-day operating budget with the budget for bricks-and-mortar projects. Beach said it also obscures the fact that the council used one-time funds from the pot of money for capital projects to help balance the budget.

The debate continues. Last week, Leggett said he would shut down all but essential government services for two days this fall as part of an \$8 million package of planned trims. Leggett warned that he would probably come back to the council in November with a more extensive plan for midyear budget trims, including more furlough days.

If Leggett follows through with his plan to force employees to stay home without pay for two days, it would be the county's first furlough since 1992.

Knapp said Leggett was acting too hastily by raising the possibility of furloughing county employees to close the budget gap.

"I think it is premature," he told reporters Monday. "We may need to do furloughs, but I am not sure it is the way to go now. . . . It is not a place you start. I was surprised when I saw that was their proposal."

Disability Revision Timing Divides County Officials

Even before the County Council takes up problems with the police disability retirement system at a committee hearing today, a rift appears to have emerged over how to handle the issue.

A report by the inspector general's office issued this week found that 62 percent of police officers who retired in the past four years are collecting disability benefits. Leggett's own review of the system found that more than 30 percent of all public safety retirees in the past eight years were approved for disability, a far greater percentage than the rates in neighboring jurisdictions such as Howard and Fairfax counties. His report recommended seven changes.

But in a meeting with the council this week, County Executive Isiah Leggett urged members to avoid a "rush to any quick judgments" and go slowly in trying to overhaul a complicated system. He cautioned against running with the inspector general's findings and said the report "has some flaws."

That direction didn't sit well with council member [Phil Andrews](#) (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), who leads the Public Safety Committee, and said time is of the essence to fix the \$32 million program. The only conclusion one can draw from the inspector general's report, Andrews said, is that "the system is broken, it's being gamed and taxpayers are being ripped off."

"We need to address it as soon as we can," he said.

Ruling on Transgender Law Ends Buildup for Campaign

The decision this week by Maryland's highest court blocking a referendum on Montgomery County's new transgender rights law allows the measure to take effect immediately -- and puts an end to what could have become a costly campaign battle.

The [Human Rights Campaign](#) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had each provided \$20,000 for the group Basic Rights Montgomery to hire campaign staff.

Opponents of the law, led by Maryland Citizens for Responsible Government, have had the backing of

Alliance Defense Fund, a conservative legal fund.

Amy Smith, a lawyer with the fund, said the group would review the court's full opinion before deciding whether to bring a lawsuit against the county Board of Elections.

Meeting Set for Tuesday On Home Invasion Crimes

Montgomery County Council member [Roger Berliner](#) (D-Potomac-Bethesda), county police and the [Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center](#) will host an informational meeting at Seven Locks Elementary School at 8 p.m. Tuesday on several home invasions in the area over the past year.

Police have not determined whether the latest crime, which resulted in the death of a Bethesda woman whose body was found in her home last Thursday, is linked to previous incidents.

The meeting will be in the all-purpose room at the school, at 9500 Seven Locks Rd.

Officials will discuss and distribute information on how residents can protect themselves. There will be an opportunity to ask questions. For information on the meeting, call 240-777-7828.

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