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Unintended consequences of ambulance fees

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Several weeks ago, I read, "In the words of Ronald Reagan, there they go again" ["Ambulance fee just makes sense," April 28].

It was simply another letter written by one of the county executive's staff supporting the proposed imposition of ambulance fees. Since it is Isiah Leggett who, year after year, attempts to impose these fees, I found the statement particularly confusing. I could refute every claim that Patrick Lacefield made, like that the Montgomery County fire service and its volunteers have a vastly different funding structure than other counties he cites and will be significantly and detrimentally affected by the proposed fees, but I will instead say: twice in six years, the county executive has proposed these fees, only to have them rejected by the County Council due to serious policy concerns and widespread public opposition.

Leggett has indicated that the fees are intended "to recover costs generated by providing ... transports via county ambulances." This is misleading. First, while the bill provides that the fees will be used to supplement fire and rescue services, the county's office of management and budget has reversed course and indicated the language is intended to "supplant," which would mean that no monies will go toward recovering costs generated through transports and the fire/rescue service will receive absolutely no additional funding. Second, the county intends to also bill for transports via non-county purchased ambulances. Will the county distinguish between those transports performed by volunteers, in non-county units, not using county-purchased equipment, or by organizations not using any county funds whatsoever (like the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad)? No. Does the county plan to simply reap the benefits of those transports while providing absolutely nothing in return? Yes.

Leggett has argued that insurance companies will be paying the bills. This too is misleading. First, the bill specifically notes that except in the case of hardship, "each individual ... transport[ed] is responsible for paying the ... fee." Second, if insurance companies do ultimately assume the fees, they will be forced to recoup their costs through raised premiums. Proponents have argued that the increases will be minimal. As the chief operating officer of a consulting company, I disagree. Even a 1 percent increase in premiums will result in thousands of dollars in increased costs to my company, resulting in decreased coverage for employees.

Leggett's proposal is perhaps most short-sighted in its potential effect on fire service volunteers, such as me. Notwithstanding that no money will actually make its way back to fund non-county owned stations or non-county purchased vehicles or equipment, some residents will believe that donating to local departments will be unnecessary. If donations decrease substantially to these organizations (like BCC Rescue Squad), how will the county executive avoid incurring millions of dollars in costs to hire career personnel to do jobs currently performed by volunteers and provide or replace community-purchased fuel, vehicles, or equipment? Leggett will lose every cent he proposes to raise and more — putting the county in more fiscal jeopardy in three or 10 years than it is in now.

Brooke Davies, Silver Spring

The writer is vice president of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad.