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Elrich calls Long Branch bridge project 'boondoggle'

\$2.4 million span to library originally budgeted at \$1 million

County News | Erin Cunningham

The Montgomery County Council might as well have set fire to \$2.4 million Monday, according to Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

He was referring to the council's approval of a \$2.4 million bridge to the Long Branch Library in Silver Spring.

The bridge — once envisioned as a pedestrian passageway — has become more costly because of enhanced standards that have been put in place since the bridge was proposed about four years ago.

At that time, the bridge was projected to cost about \$1 million.

"This will go down as one of the greatest boondoggles in Montgomery County history," Elrich said during a council meeting Monday.

While the bridge and a connected path are being paid for with federal grants, Elrich said it is no excuse to waste the money.

"I'm just really unhappy that just because this is other people's money that [the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission thinks it is OK] to set fire to it," he said. "I'm stunned."

The bridge funding originally was part of County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) proposed capital budget, but council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park pulled the item from discussions because council members questioned the spending.

It was taken up Monday as part of the council's fiscal 2011 operating budget deliberations.

The bridge is to replace an existing wood-planked bridge that links the Long Branch Community Center to the library. The proposed bridge is 10 feet wide and 170 feet long and could accommodate emergency vehicles, such as fire trucks.

Plans also call for a 374-foot-long blacktop trail and \$750,000 in streetscape improvements from Flower Avenue to Garland Avenue.

Elrich said he recently walked across the bridge from the center — a trip that took about 1 minute.

He said the bridge might need only a few new wooden planks — not the larger-scale project that was approved Monday.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park described the project as "excessive and expensive."

But he said it was important to remember that the county's disabled residents might have a more difficult time crossing the current bridge than Elrich did.

Because the bridge crosses parkland owned by the Park and Planning Commission, it must meet the American Society of Transportation Officials standards — meaning that it was changed to a more costly 10-foot-wide design.

And in order to receive an additional \$742,500 in federal funding, the county is required to comply with the State Highway Administration's interpretation of Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, which added additional costs.

The bridge and trail are scheduled to be completed in November 2011.

Leventhal wants

to limit borrowing

Leventhal introduced a bill Tuesday that would prevent the county from borrowing money to pay for privately owned building projects.

The bill stems from a Leggett proposal to pay for \$1.5 million in construction projects for six county nonprofit organizations in his fiscal 2011 capital budget.

Leventhal said Leggett believes the spending is allowed under the law, but Leventhal said his bill would close what could be a loophole allowing the spending.

Volunteer fire companies would be exempt from the bill, which is scheduled for a public hearing June 22.

The bill also is sponsored by Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

However, the county has been helping nonprofit agencies with their capital needs for years, and the projects will benefit county residents, according to county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield.

"Each one of them will leverage the county contribution many times over by bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars in state and private matching funds," he said.

The projects will benefit CHI Centers Inc. (\$200,000); the Ivymount Schools (\$100,000), which serves students with disabilities; Girl Scouts of the National Capital Area (\$100,000); the Jewish Foundation for Group Homes (\$50,000); the Olney Theatre (\$500,000); and the Old Blair Auditorium (\$600,000).

Leventhal said the bill will prevent the county executive or council from using grants to nonprofits for "short-term political benefit."

"There might be a time ... when the county executive is running for governor, and a council member is running for county executive and another council member is running for attorney general," Leventhal said, alluding to the situation that occurred during former Executive Douglas M. Duncan's administration.

"Elected officials sometimes need constraints," Leventhal said. "There are times when we must say no."

Council debates pay for new Planning Board commissioner

Setting the salary for Montgomery County's new Planning Board chairman Tuesday escalated into a condemnation of managerial salaries in county government.

At issue was whether to pay Francoise Carrier \$160,000 or \$170,000.

The position was advertised at a salary of between \$160,000 and \$180,000. Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg proposed paying Carrier \$170,000.

But Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown said that sent a "horrible horrible signal" to county government employees, who are facing furloughs, cuts to hours and the possible loss of their jobs.

Council members cited the salaries of some managers in county government — the majority of which were about \$200,000.

Elrich called the salaries "obscene" and said he would like to reduce the salaries of some of the county's highest paid workers.

Andrews agreed that managerial salaries are high in the county and said he would like to lower them. He also reminded council members that like most other employees, the head of the planning board will be subject to employee furloughs.

"Not the superintendent of schools," Leventhal said.

Leventhal was referring to the heated debate between the school system and the County Council over the issue of furloughs for school system employees.