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Budget-cutting proposal to merge park officers into county police ripped

Plan would be 'bad public policy,' Hanson says

by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

Some Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission employees and park advocates are expressing alarm at a Montgomery County proposal to dissolve the park police and reassign protection of the county's parks and their users to county police.

The idea, which was raised by County Executive Isiah Leggett and the County Council last week, appears to be gaining momentum following new estimates that put the county's budget deficit at \$1 billion. Critics, however, say that eliminating park police is a false solution that would not serve the interests of the parkland or those who enjoy it.

"It is bad public policy and bad management," county Park and Planning Commission Chairman Royce Hanson wrote in a letter, dated Friday, to County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park.

Hanson, who is set to retire this summer from his second tour as chairman, said it is another attempt by the executive branch to "wrest power over the park system and parkland" from the appointed commission to "direct political control."

On Thursday, Leggett (D) called for merging the Montgomery County division of the park police, overseen by the county's Park and Planning Commission, into the county's police department, which is part of the executive branch.

The County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee raised the issue earlier as it considered how it might consolidate functions in the county's parks department and the county's recreation departments to save money and gain efficiencies.

Replacing park police with county police patrols would jeopardize the safety of park users and would "ultimately increase costs," Hanson said in his letter, noting that county police are paid more on average than park police.

Park police patrol more than 400 large and small parks covering about 34,000 acres, parks spokeswoman Kelli Holsendolph said.

Like county police, park police carry weapons, make arrests and provide assistance to other police departments within the county. Because the county police department has the necessary forensics laboratories, it takes the lead, working with park police, in investigating homicides and rapes on parkland, said park police Sgt. Lauryn McNeill.

Park police are charged with protecting natural resources as well as people and property in parks, she said. For example, while county police are more call-driven, park police have such duties as patrolling to prevent illegal hunting.

The Leggett administration has said it could save \$2 million by merging some park and county police operations next year, but has offered few details on how, except that the two forces could combine dispatching and communications.

"To assume any savings in the first year may be to expect too much, [but] I think people are open to a lot of discussion," said PHED Committee Chairman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

County Police Chief J. Thomas Manger has said a merger with the park system police force, which includes 95 sworn officers and 25 civilians, would be "tremendously complicated" and would take "quite a while," but was worth exploring.

"Hard choices need to be made," and agencies have to trim expectations and find new savings, Leggett spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said.

Because state law puts park police under the supervision of M-NCPPC, a state agency serving Montgomery and Prince George's counties, a merger would require a change in state law. That could not happen until the legislature reconvenes next year.

Meanwhile, there are ways to move ahead now, and "it's important to put this on the front burner," Lacefield said.

"The problem is there is no plan," said parks Director Mary Bradford, adding that estimated savings of \$2 million "appeared to be a plug number" without enough information to substantiate it.

The parks department already proposed cutting the equivalent of 48 full-time positions, or work years, from its 800 work years, Bradford said.

New cuts would require the parks department, which owns or controls recreational facilities and about 10 percent of land in the county, to cut another 200 work years, she said.

Knapp said the council needs to say in its budget resolution "what we'd like to happen and when."

Staff Writer Erin Cunningham contributed to this report.