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Tension rises over proposed county budget

Union, community groups hold rallies

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposal to spend about \$360,000 on four personal bodyguards and \$50,000 on an inauguration ceremony is under attack by the head of the government employees' union.

"There is a growing, intense anger and just absolute resentment toward [Leggett] and his management team that I have never seen in the 33 years I've been around," Gino Renne said Monday.

Renne is president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, which has about 8,000 members in Montgomery County.

Leggett's spending requests were included in his proposed fiscal 2011 budget, which the County Council will take up beginning next week. Council members are expected to vote on the budget May 20.

However, on Tuesday Leggett described Renne's comments as "silliness" that do nothing to help the county through a tough budget year. Renne's attacks were only meant to "cloud the debate," he said.

His security detail performs other duties as well, he said, and is needed due to threats he has encountered while in office. The bodyguards have been part of the county executive's office budget since the Douglas M. Duncan administration.

Renne called the bodyguards "overpaid drivers" and said that task can be performed by employees at a lower salary.

As for the inauguration, Leggett said it is not a personal party, but rather an event that is included in the county budget once every four years for all newly elected officials.

"We don't have to do anything," Leggett said of the event. "I don't care."

Leggett's proposed \$4.3 billion budget could include as many as 232 layoffs, 10 furlough days for some employees and widespread cuts that affect Health and Human Services, libraries and other programs.

Leggett and other elected officials also would be furloughed under the budget.

The possible cuts and layoffs have prompted two public rallies this week — one by Renne's union and the other by minority groups that believe they have been unfairly targeted by cuts.

Montgomery County elected officials are predicting widespread pain as they decide which county employees, programs and services to slash — and which to spare.

MCGEO planned to hold a rally Tuesday night to energize its members and send a strong political message to the council that union members expect them to take a fair and balanced approach to adopting the budget, Renne said.

"No one group should be expected to pay more of the bill than anyone else," he said.

Renne's position is that his members have been unfairly targeted, while management is held harmless.

Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring said Tuesday that she has heard from some people — even nonunion members — that there are opportunities to cut midlevel managers in county government rather than frontline employees.

While Renne's rally and press conference were intended to send a message to the council, six council members were invited to speak during the event.

Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3 of Gaithersburg); Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac; and Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda were not invited.

However, their message might not give hope to union members worried about their jobs and salaries. No council member has said publicly that he or she plans to spare all employees from furloughs and layoffs.

"I think it's important that we reassure our employees that even though they are going to have to make sacrifices we do appreciate them and we are grateful for their service," said Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said Monday that there is a lot of "unhappiness out there" regarding the proposed budget.

About 40 speakers shared their unhappiness with the council Monday night during the first public hearing on the budget. About 200 people attended the hearing at the Montgomery County Council Office Building in Rockville.

Many of the speakers said they understood that sacrifices would be necessary and asked the council not to vote for cuts beyond what the county executive proposed. Leggett cut the county's budget by 3.8 percent overall.

CASA de Maryland Executive Director Gustavo Torres said his group was one of several, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, planning a press conference and rally in front of the council office building this morning asking for funding to be restored to some health care and social services for the county's Hispanic, black and Asian-American communities.

Torres said the cuts, which in some cases gut programs that he says help the county's most vulnerable, will prevent 6,000 residents from accessing the services.

Leggett's proposed budget eliminates an Asian-American health initiative that helps provide services and referrals in their own languages. It also includes a 50 percent reduction in HIV prevention programs and other programs that he says benefit the black community.

Torres recommends a 7 percent cut for those services — what he says is comparable to cuts in other county departments.

"We are in crisis. We understand that," he said. "But why are you eliminating cuts for minority communities that are more in need?"

Excerpts from recent letters and e-mail to the Montgomery County Council regarding the proposed fiscal 2011 budget:

- "PLEASE, as an OLD senior, I beg you not to add another energy tax on top of PEPCO increases. We are being nicked and dined to death by the utilities and you."

—Betty Lewis

- "I was disappointed to learn that the county's proposed budget includes a 70% reduction in funding for Community Vision."

—Neal J.B. Simon

- "As a county employee, I am very concerned about the laying off of employees. WE are already short staffed, so it is difficult for us and for the customers, and it is also very difficult for the laid off workers to find new jobs these days."

—Lynn Sanvar

- "I'm writing to ask you to please keep Noyes Library in Kensington open."

—Leah Shepherd

- "I am writing to urge you to approve funding (to) renovate the Old Blair Auditorium."

—Lynn Baumeister

- "In the event of a vote for approval, will the council members and all county politically placed individuals be required to take 10 furlough days during the next fiscal year?"

—Michael Pierpoint