

Ambulance fee falls amid 'anti-tax' storm

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Thursday, November 4, 2010; B06

Among the toughest feats of linguistic gymnastics attempted by supporters of Montgomery County's ambulance fee was trying to convince the public that it was not a fee at all.

Even in a county where Democrats were dominant Tuesday despite big Republican gains nationwide, that little word was about as popular as another three-letter political expletive that begins with "t" and ends with "x."

County Executive Isiah Leggett's lieutenants in the extraordinary government campaign for the fee made an effort to rechristen it an "ambulance reimbursement," because bills for service would go directly to county residents' insurance companies or the federal government. But many voters rejected both that semantic shading and the broader policy.

"It has gone through lots of gyrations, but I think it's an anti-tax, anti-fee kind of vote," said Phyllis Fordham, a retired sales executive. "We do feel our government wastes a lot of money."

Fordham was angered when Leggett had county employees hang yellow banners supporting the fee on public buildings. She said the electioneering was "outrageous" and considers Leggett disingenuous for proposing last month to cut ambulance service and firefighters if the fee failed. "It was just another ploy," Fordham said.

She apparently had company Tuesday. In unofficial results, voters rejected the referendum on the fee 54 percent to 46 percent, with many registering not only fiscal but also deep philosophical objections. The vote leaves Leggett, the County Council and Montgomery residents facing a multimillion-dollar midyear budget hole that no one knows how to plug.

Leggett is leaving the onus on the council, which was split when it passed the fee in May and must now make the final decisions.

"We don't have it. I'm sorry we don't have it," Leggett said of the fee. "We'll have to do without it. . . . My opinion, and why I was making this case is, it's going to be very, very difficult, and it's going to be very painful, and it's not going to be short-term."

Fee proponents had said it would generate \$14 million annually. Some of that would have gone to administer the program. Leggett last month proposed \$12.9 million in midyear cuts, including "destaffing" 11 emergency units, layoffs and less money for drug treatment, the elderly, libraries and at-risk teens.

Council member Marc Elrich (D-at large), who like his fellow council candidates sailed to victory Tuesday, voted for the fee during deliberations this year on the county's \$4.27 billion budget.

"If people knew where there was \$12â? Šmillion of cuts in the spring, nobody brought it up. We were struggling, cutting all kinds of little programs, after-school programs, all sorts of good programs because we couldn't find the money," Elrich said. "People may not like the choices Ike made. But there aren't any good choices. We got all the low-hanging fruit."

Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) said she is expecting new revenue figures from the state this month that will influence the council's next steps.

And if the economy is worse than anticipated, "We may have to go way further" than Leggett did, Floreen said. If things are better, officials could try "to stay in the current holding pattern."

John Sparks, head of Montgomery's firefighters union, was a key Leggett partner in the campaign. Hundreds of career fire and rescue personnel worked neighborhoods, shopping malls and polling places. He estimates that before the concerted government and union-backed campaign began weeks ago, some 75 percent or 80 percent of voters were against the ambulance fee.

One problem was that pesky three-letter word. "Calling it a fee . . . really hindered us with those voters we couldn't get" to talk to, Sparks said. "People thought it was another tax."

Officials said they would not have charged residents a cent, and that co-pays also would have been covered. Out-of-county residents without insurance would have received a bill but could have been granted a hardship waiver.

Sparks said the county should make Leggett's cuts.

"I guess the public has spoken. Put the 11 ambulances out of service. That's what the county executive proposed, and the people didn't say 'no,' " Sparks said. "If the public wants longer response times to 911, well, okay. If that's what they want, then give it to them."

Longtime fee opponent Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), who was allied with volunteer firefighters, said he is concerned about another spending question: How much the county government spent campaigning for the fee.

Leggett, who said years ago that this term would be his last, thinks the groundwork laid in this failed effort might help pass the fee later. "It's not leadership to say, 'The popular view is to do it this way,' " Leggett said. "It was the right thing to do."