

Ambulance fee supporters defend controversial move

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ROCKVILLE — Advocates of the controversial ambulance fee hope to gain Montgomery County residents' support for the proposal with a plan that would charge insurance companies directly, instead of sending a bill through the resident first. The "Vote for Question A" campaign announced at a press conference Tuesday it will educate the public through direct mailing and a door-to-door effort with the aim of educating voters in time for the Nov. 2 election when adoption of the legislation is up for a vote.

"We have collected sufficient funds for a substantial education and outreach effort," campaign spokesman Edward Cooper said.

He said the group was made up of members of the state delegation and the League of Women Voters and is chaired by Delegate Sheila Hixon, who also chairs the state's House Ways and Means committee.

"Within the last few days, this group was formed with various state delegates — it could change the course of this vote," Cooper said.

Under the proposed legislation, county residents' insurance companies would be charged between \$300 and \$800 for an ambulance ride, depending on distance. County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett said uninsured residents would not be required to pay the fee, but non-county residents are on the hook for any cost not covered by their insurance companies. According to Cooper, outside residents without insurance would still get a bill under Vote A.

"I have a question for those who oppose the county getting reimbursements: If this will have such a terrible effect, where then is the evidence of that in all the jurisdictions all around us? Why hasn't this program been repealed in those places?" county Fire Chief Richard Bowers said. "It hasn't, because it works."

Leggett announced Oct. 5 that if citizens do vote down the ambulance fee, there will be repercussions in the fiscal year 2010 county budget to make up for the \$12.9 million that was already factored in to come from the adoption of the ambulance fee. According to Leggett, those consequences include the destaffing of 11 emergency vehicles, cuts in ambulance services and laying off dozens of fire and rescue workers.

Leggett spokesman Patrick Lacefield said he did not know how much has been spent on outreach but estimated at least 20,000 fliers have been distributed. The flier, that educates the reader on the ambulance fee and also promotes its adoption is also displayed on the home page of the county's main website.

Leggett also announced Tuesday that uniformed fire fighters are allowed to distribute promotional information about the ambulance fee during their shifts for the next two weeks. Leggett's decision is supported by the county attorney and Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler (D) who said the decision is perfectly legal.

“This is highly inappropriate,” Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) said. “It’s an abuse of taxpayer dollars, and I think the public would agree.”

“They have the same freedom of speech as everyone else,” countered Bowers at the press conference Tuesday.

Some council members, such as Andrews, have accused Leggett of using the proposed cuts as a scare tactic. Andrews said he is developing an alternate list of cuts he will propose to the council should voters reject the fee to make up for the loss. Leggett’s extremely vocal campaign to get the ambulance fee adopted has members of the county council somewhat divided over how the focus on the campaign is affecting productivity within Leggett’s office.

“Why are there so many layoffs proposed to make up for a small fraction of our budget?” said Andrews, who chairs the county’s public safety committee. The councilman added that his list of cuts would not include the loss of ambulances or cutting county fire fighter positions.

“The voters will make the final decision, and that’s where I believe they will make the right decision,” Andrews said.