

# Andrews: How much did we spend?

## **Councilman demands full accounting of funds spent to promote ambulance fee referendum**

Published on: Thursday, November 18, 2010

By Paige L. Hill

Montgomery County Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) won't rest until residents receive a full accounting of the county taxpayer money spent on the pro-Ambulance Fee campaign out of County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett's (D) office in the weeks leading up to the Nov. 2 election.

Though county spokesman Patrick Lacefield released an estimate of about \$10,000 spent in costs associated with printing fliers and posters for the campaign, Andrews said that number does not represent the salaries paid to the county employees who worked on the campaign, a number that he estimates could be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"The Executive Branch launched a campaign using taxpayer money and employees on the payroll advocating that voters side with its view of this issue," Andrews said. "Regardless of how residents felt about the fee, I think many agree that county funds should not have been spent in this manner – especially when this county is in the most difficult budget situation it has ever faced."

The legislation, formally known as the EMS Transport Fee, proposed that county residents' insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid be charged between \$300 and \$800 for an ambulance ride, depending on distance. In a memo sent Tuesday, Andrews requested a full accounting and a breakdown of the spending on the campaign also known as "Vote For Question A" out of Leggett's office, saying that the request was coming "at the urging of county residents."

Andrews' memo was sent to the county's Chief Administrative Officer Timothy Firestine as Leggett is in Egypt on a personal vacation and is expected to return Monday, according to Lacefield. Andrews asks Firestine to address four main areas of spending: the cost to print fliers, brochures, signs and banners; the cost of installing and removing banners from county buildings; the cost of using on-duty career fire fighters assigned to campaign on behalf of Question A and any overtime costs paid to these campaigning fire and rescue personnel.

"Will the county report this as a contribution or expenditure on behalf of Question A to the state Board of Elections, or as an in-kind contribution to the 'Vote For A Committee' on the campaign finance reports due November 23?" Andrews asked in his memo. "If not, why not?"

Andrews also reminds Firestine in the memo that this kind of reporting must be completed by this Tuesday when campaign finance reports are due. The Sentinel also filed a request with the executive office for a breakdown of costs spent on the campaign under the Freedom of Information Act.

"This work was on county policy and everything was completely legal," Lacefield said. He added that the executive office does not regularly break down how employees' time is spent and on what tasks, therefore, Andrews may not get answers to all of his questions.

“That’s unacceptable considering that was probably the largest expense,” Andrews said in answer. He estimated the average salary for a county employee working the polls would be \$40 to \$50 an hour.

In the final days before the vote, supporters of the Ambulance Fee formed a committee called the “Vote for Question A” campaign made up of members of the state delegation and the League of Women Voters; it was chaired by Delegate Sheila Hixon (D). The supporters resorted to what some residents called “intimidating” tactics to gain their vote – fire trucks were parked outside of polling places and uniformed firefighters passed out information on the fee. On-duty county fire fighters pushed the Ambulance Fee per the county executive’s instruction. County fire chief Richard Bowers announced at that time that career firefighters’ campaigning for the fee were protected under “the freedom of speech.”

“What the county is doing is legal – end of story,” said County Attorney Marc Hansen, referring to a county personnel code which states a county employee has a right to “defend a county law.”

What remains to be seen is how the county will make up for the loss of what Leggett’s office estimated could be \$12.9 million in net revenue from the fee that the county factored into this fiscal year’s budget. After the fee was narrowly passed in a 5-4 county council vote in May, it was included in the budget. Volunteer firefighters and rescue teams vocally opposed the vote and began a petition process to get the Ambulance Fee on the ballot with a voter referendum. Though their petition process was unsuccessful in convincing the county’s Board of Elections that the issue should be on the ballot, the Maryland Court of Appeals turned over their decision and put Question A on the ballot.

The county executive announced following that decision that rejecting the ambulance fee could mean major budget cuts in the future and the laying off of more than 100 firefighters to make up for the loss of \$12.9 million in net revenue the county factored into this fiscal year’s budget.

“We will have to make up the revenue in millions of dollars of cuts,” Leggett said with that announcement. “It includes everything from libraries to recreation to fire and rescue services itself, which is the ironic part.”