

Andrews requests log of county expenses on ambulance fee issue

County spokesman says all spending was not recorded

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer | November 17, 2010

A Montgomery County councilman is asking County Executive Isiah Leggett's office to report how much taxpayer money the county spent advocating for a county ambulance fee, which appeared on the Nov. 2 ballot as a referendum question.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg estimates that the cost could be hundreds of thousands of dollars in employee time and printed materials.

However, a county spokesman said that all costs related to the county's campaign cannot be determined. The county likely would release the cost of printed materials — about \$10,000 — but not the cost of employee time, county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said.

In a memo sent Tuesday, Andrews requested a full accounting and breakout of the spending on Question A, which asked voters to approve or reject the ambulance fee.

The fee, proposed by Leggett and approved by the County Council earlier this year, was defeated by voters Nov. 2 in the referendum. The fee, which would have charged insurance companies, Medicaid and Medicare for ambulance rides, was expected to bring in about \$14 million in revenue this fiscal year.

Andrews has been the council's staunchest opponent of the fee.

Paid county firefighters worked the polls on Election Day and during five days of early voting, and distributed county-generated fliers in support of the fee during their shifts. County employees also posted pro-ambulance fee signs on county buildings, and supported a political action committee that formed to support the referendum, Question A.

Andrews' memo was sent to Timothy Firestine, the county's Chief Administrative Officer, who is serving as acting county executive while Leggett is out of the country on a personal vacation to Egypt. Leggett is expected to return Monday.

In his memo, Andrews requests information on the cost to print fliers, brochures, signs and banners; the cost of installing and removing Question A banners on county buildings; the number of on-duty career fire personnel assigned to promote ambulance fees; and any overtime costs associated with the county's advocacy.

Andrews also questions whether the county will report any of its spending to the state Board of Elections as an in-kind contribution to the political action committee that campaigned for Question A. Such a report would need to be submitted by Nov. 23.

Andrews said the work that county employees did for the PAC, including the distribution of fliers and signs, should be reported as in-kind contributions.

Lacefield said it appeared they should not.

"Why would it?" Lacefield asked. "This was work on county policy."

He said there is no additional cost for employees to advocate for the ambulance fee rather than completing their normal job responsibilities.

Lacefield said Tuesday he was unsure when the spending information, which also has been requested by The Gazette, would be given to Andrews. He added that Andrews would not receive answers to all of his questions.

"We don't have information about how much time anyone spent on it," Lacefield said. "I don't break down my time. We don't break down any other employee's time."

Andrews called that unacceptable, saying that the largest expense of the county's advocacy will be in personnel costs. For the average employee working the polls, the hourly wage plus benefits is likely between \$40 and \$50, he said.

"There's no reason that they shouldn't be able to provide that information," Andrews said.

Andrews said he made the request for expenses after several requests from county residents. However, Lacefield said his office has received little interest in the issue.

"Everything that we did was legal, and given everything that's at stake, totally appropriate," Lacefield said.