

Embattled tuition program in MontCo gets new rules

By: **BRIAN HUGHES**
Examiner Staff Writer
October 5, 2010

Montgomery County employees would no longer be able to use taxpayer money for sailing retreats, Bible classes or exotic island getaways under new rules proposed for the suburb's embattled tuition assistance program.

Among the stricter regulations outlined by County Executive Ike Leggett: Tuition assistance funds could not be used for courses taken outside the country, or on recreational classes or religious training.

"This [improves] employee development and the tuition assistance program by providing increased accountability and better safeguards," Leggett said in a memo outlining the changes.

As The Washington Examiner first reported, county employees used the program for Spanish lessons in Costa Rica and hot yoga sessions on the taxpayers' dime. The county also paid for classes, such as "Bible Doctrines," which investigators said were hardly related to an employee's job.

Leggett also stipulated that the training courses would have to be related to an employee's job function. And taxpayer money could not be spent for courses that offer credit merely for taking a test.

The rule changes must be approved by the County Council, but some members say the new standards could signal the return of the program next fiscal year -- assuming enough money is available.

"I think it's a big improvement," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville. "It responds to many of the major concerns I had with the program."

Funding for tuition assistance would also be limited to totals negotiated in bargaining with public employees unions. In the past, police officers had unlimited access to tuition assistance money.

As a result, applications for the tuition assistance program by Fraternal Order of Police union members rose from 158 in fiscal 2006 to 498 in fiscal 2009.

A recent report by Leggett's Office of Internal Audit showed that government employees often took the training courses without approval from their supervisors, exposing the county to "waste, fraud and abuse."

Coupled with more than \$400,000 in public money county officials say was squandered on steep gun discounts, the tuition assistance program wasted a minimum of \$700,000 in taxpayer funds, according to investigators.