

Leggett threatens 10 percent cut to MontCo fire department

By: Brian Hughes
Examiner Staff Writer
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County Executive Ike Leggett said Tuesday about one in 10 county firefighters would lose his or her job if voters reject a new ambulance fee in November.

Under Leggett's plan, 107 fire and rescue positions, mostly emergency medical service jobs, would be eliminated out of a fire department staff of 1,077.

With just 20 of the positions vacant, 87 fire department workers would be handed pink slips.

Leggett released the planned cuts after Maryland's highest court ordered that a referendum on the county's ambulance fee be placed on the ballot. Without the fee, there would be a \$13 million hole in the county's budget this fiscal year.

Montgomery's top elected official admitted Tuesday that the ambulance fee would likely be rejected, and public safety advocates sounded the alarm about the impact on emergency services.

"This would be absolutely devastating," said John Sparks, president of the county's firefighters union, upon learning of the cuts. "It would have an adverse effect anytime 911 is called. We're talking about everything from car accidents to drownings."

Ironically, volunteer firefighters pushed for the voter referendum because they said the fee would make county residents less safe -- they argued some would think twice before calling 911, fearful of being charged for the service. Now they are being punished for taking on the county executive, they argue.

"I'm just ashamed of Leggett," said Eric Bernard, executive director of the county's volunteer firefighters. This is nothing but retribution and I'm appalled."

The group gathered 53,000 signatures against the fee, the most in the county's long history of ballot initiatives. Of the \$14 million in suggested cuts, nearly \$6 million would be absorbed by firefighters.

The county's nine school resource officers would also be eliminated, roadway patching reduced by \$1 million and grounds maintenance work slashed by another \$1.5 million. Leggett also says four sports academies, which cater to at-risk teenagers, would also be scrapped.

The Maryland Court of Appeals, in a 5-2 ruling, gave approval for the voter referendum, reversing the decision by local election officials to reject thousands of petition signatures because they didn't exactly match the name used when registering to vote or were illegible.

Under the measure, county residents' insurance companies are charged between \$300 and \$800 per ambulance ride. Uninsured residents are not required to pay the fee and non-county residents are on the hook for any cost not covered by their insurance companies. Some critics argue Leggett's list of cuts is nothing more than a political stunt.

"These cuts are designed to maximize the amount of pain that would be felt by them," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville. "It is a political document. Its goal is to generate support for keeping the ambulance fee by presenting a dire picture for people in the voting booth."

The County Council, which must approve the cuts, will review the package if voters overturn the fee in November.