

# Md. Court of Appeals allows MontCo ambulance fee vote

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Montgomery County voters will decide the fate of the suburb's new ambulance fee in November, the state's highest court decided Wednesday.

The Maryland Court of Appeals, in a 5-2 ruling, gave the go-ahead for a voter referendum on the charge, 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.

"It's a victory for democracy as well as a victory for common sense," said Councilman Phil Andrews D-Gaithersburg/Rockville, who had blasted the Montgomery County Board of Elections for ignoring the will of voters in the name of preventing nonexistent fraud.

The county's volunteer firefighters gathered 53,000 signatures against the fee -- the most in the county's history -- and argued the litmus test for signatures essentially made it impossible to land initiatives on the ballot. For example, a name signed Joseph Smith rather than Joseph A. Smith, the name of record, would not have been counted.

Supporters of the fee are magnifying the fiscal ramifications of the court's decision.

"The court has spoken," said County Executive Ike Leggett, who has championed the ambulance fee for years. "We would have to make up the revenue in millions of dollars of cuts. It would be across the board, and it includes everything from libraries to recreation to fire and rescue services itself, which is the ironic part."

Leggett says he will send the proposed cuts to the County Council in coming days. If voters reject the ambulance fee -- a likely development,

according to local political observers -- it will create a \$12.5 million hole in a budget that county officials already label historically lean.

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.

Eric Bernard, executive director for the volunteer firefighters, said the county executive is trying to frighten voters into accepting his pet project.

"That's a scare tactic that I'm just shocked Leggett would stoop to," he said of inferred public safety cuts.

County officials are barred from collecting more money generated by the ambulance fee until voters weigh in on the matter. And Leggett told *The Washington Examiner*, "I'm not going to add any additional taxes."

Volunteer firefighters will try to convince voters the ambulance fee is bad public policy, arguing it will make some residents think twice before calling 911.