

# MontCo council to block Leggett's public safety layoffs

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A Montgomery County Council panel Monday rejected dozens of layoffs for public safety officials that County Executive Ike Leggett said were necessary to tackle a growing shortfall and offset revenue lost when voters killed the suburb's ambulance fee.

The council's public safety committee voted against Leggett's plan to hand pink slips to nine school resource officers and nearly two dozen fire officials, among other modifications to a \$36 million savings plan proposed by the county executive for this fiscal year.

"There is not a fiscal need to eliminate the school resource officers," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville. "When the council can avoid making significant, disruptive changes it should do so. I say that knowing it will probably be right back before us in the spring."

Instead, the panel recommended letting nine positions lapse to save \$518,000, a move hardly endorsed by police leadership.

## Leggett reverses course on firefighter layoffs

Prior to November's election, County Executive Leggett said nearly 90 firefighters -- or one in 10 -- would be laid off if Montgomery voters rejected the jurisdiction's new ambulance fee.

But in a recent modification -- and after voters overwhelmingly killed the charge -- Leggett said the same \$3.5 million could be achieved simply through "attrition" of the department's work force.

Critics, including some council members, said Leggett's original proposal was meant to scare voters into supporting the fee. As council staff noted Monday, the fire department averages 2.7 new vacancies per month, meaning there would not be nearly enough lapsed positions to produce the same savings Leggett originally proposed.

Leggett's office did not respond to calls seeking comment.

"My priorities have to be response to 911 calls and investigating crimes," said Police Chief Thomas Manger, who called the resource officers mostly preventative and noted that 48 fewer cops patrol the streets than three years ago. "I'm trying to avoid laying off police officers. We're right at that tipping point."

Leggett also proposed eliminating 11 ambulances and laying off nearly two dozen administrative fire positions. Instead, the committee said Fire Chief Richard Bowers should identify \$870,000 in

savings, roughly the same amount of money expected to be created this fiscal year by not filling vacancies.

The cuts proposed for fire and rescue, by percentage, were nearly 10 times as much as most departments, a figure not lost on volunteer firefighters, who fought against the ambulance fees.

"The drastic cuts to volunteer support funding are a blatant form of retaliation by the county executive in response to [the volunteer firefighters'] successful opposition to the executive's signature issue this fall," said Eric Bernard, executive director of the volunteer firefighters.

The full council on Tuesday is expected to approve about \$32 million worth of mid-year cuts -- roughly \$4 million less than Leggett suggested. However, council members fully endorsed Leggett's plan to cut \$19 million this fiscal year from public schools. Montgomery faces nearly a \$350 million shortfall over the next year and a half.