

Montgomery County Council blocks raises for firefighters

By: [Brian Hughes](#) 11/30/10 8:05 PM

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Montgomery County Council members overwhelmingly blocked pay raises for a few hundred firefighters Tuesday, a hard line they say will become commonplace amid mounting deficits caused by unaffordable salaries and benefits for government employees.

County Executive Ike Leggett previously signed off on nearly an additional \$1,000 a year for about 250 firefighters, citing the suburb's difficulty in recruiting those with the most advanced paramedic training.

But with an 8-1 vote, the council refused to fund the raises.

"How quickly it has become politically correct," remarked Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, D-at large, of the council's increased focus on compensation and benefits. "How appropriate that it remains front and center."

Trachtenberg, who was defeated in the Democratic primary, has repeatedly attributed her political downfall to her willingness to take on Montgomery's public employee unions.

After the election, the county's Office of Legislative Oversight released a sobering report that concluded budget shortfalls would persist if salaries or benefits were not reduced. A follow-up report to be released next week will outline recommended drastic cuts to employee benefits, according to county officials familiar with the study.

Between salary and benefits, the average Montgomery County employee costs taxpayers about \$100,000 a year, the report found.

The starting salary for a Montgomery County paramedic is \$41,673, a few thousand dollars less than in the District and Fairfax County. But that figure doesn't include benefits, which generally equal about 60 percent of the base salary for public safety officials.

However, Fire Chief Richard Bowers said that of 2,600 firefighter candidates in the most recent recruitment class, just 10 had obtained advanced life-support training.

Councilman Mike Knapp, D-Germantown, who broke with his council colleagues, pointed out that more than 70 percent of all 911 calls within the county are for rescue service.

"This is a problem we have to resolve that has been ongoing for many years," he said of paramedic recruitment. "We still haven't solved the problem."

But responding directly to Knapp, Council President Nancy Floreen said, "The problem right now is a lack of resources."

The issue will return to collective bargaining with the county's public employee unions, which executive officials began in recent weeks.