

Montgomery council votes to preserve nine police officers in county schools

School system may have to help pay for officers next fiscal year

by Erin Cunningham and Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writers

Montgomery County Public Schools will continue to have some police presence in public high schools after the County Council voted Tuesday to keep nine school resource officers in this year's county budget.

Next fiscal year, however, the school system may have to chip in for officers.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) recommended earlier this month that the positions, funded through the county police budget, be eliminated.

But on Tuesday, the council accepted the recommendation of the Public Safety Committee to maintain funding for the school resource officers for the rest of the year. This followed a 3-0 vote from the council's Public Safety Committee on Monday to keep funding the resource officers through at least June 30.

Eliminating the school resource officers would have saved the county \$518,650. But Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said the committee wanted to stay consistent with its commitment in a May budget resolution to fund the nine officers for the school year.

"We're saying, 'continue with that policy for the rest of the year,'" Andrews told the council before the vote Tuesday.

The County Council voted on the officers along with about \$36 million in reductions to the county's fiscal 2011 budget. The county is facing a budget shortfall of more than \$300 million in fiscal 2012.

Leggett is asking most department heads to consider cutting their budgets by as much as 15 percent in fiscal 2012, which begins July 1.

On Monday, Andrews said the county should not disrupt the school resource officer program in the middle of a school year. But he also said he would like for Montgomery County Public Schools to pay for all or some of the school resource program, which serves its schools, for the next budget year. The county's schools are funded by the county government.

"It seems pretty clear that the county executive is unlikely, I suspect, to recommend funding [school resource officers] in the 2012 budget," Andrews said Monday after the committee vote.

Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said the issue is far from resolved, but the council next year will discuss how the school resource officer program should be funded.

"[The school resource officers] are working in their buildings," Ervin said of the schools. "They should be sharing the cost."

But school board members have expressed opposition to moving the cost of the officers into the school system's budget, because they have their own budget difficulties. Out of the \$36 million in cuts, Leggett asked the school system to find \$19 million in reductions for fiscal 2011.

The school resource officer program has been reduced by the county government since 2009, when 33 police officers were assigned to schools. Nine officers now rotate among the county's high schools.

In the budget recommendation, Leggett proposed eliminating the school resource officer program, but not eliminating jobs for those officers, who would be assigned to other duties.

During Monday's meeting, Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said he has 43 fewer police officers on the force than he did three years ago, and is short in many patrol divisions.

That, he said, has to be his top priority — making sure there are enough officers to respond to emergencies and investigate crimes.

"Please understand, I see great value in this program," Manger told the council committee regarding the school resource officers. "We've gone from one in every high school to nine this year. I've seen consequences of that. We're dealing with cases where if there was a police officer there full time, we wouldn't be dealing with it."

A lot of the officers' work does not show up in crime statistics or calls from schools, said Board of Education member Judith Docca.

In addition to talking with students during lunch about their concerns and putting a human face on the police department, the officers have meetings with parents and staff to discuss drug, gang, and other community issues, she said.

"We want to keep students cognizant of the people who are in the community who can help them," said Docca (Dist. 1) of Montgomery Village last week.

As a parent of a Springbrook High School student, Andrick Pestano of Silver Spring said the school's resource officer, Rodney Barnes, prevents incidents simply by his presence. Students who may be considering causing trouble can see the consequence right in front of them, she said.

"When I go visit the school, he's always on call, he's always on duty," Pestano said.