

Montgomery hopes donors will cough up cash for park privies

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Montgomery County's parks department is moving ahead with plans to seek private donors to endow portable toilets in the county's public parks, complete with a laminated plaque identifying the sponsor.

Parks chief Mary Bradford said Friday that she needs about \$150,000 annually to keep the toilets, or about \$65 a month per toilet, which covers rental, maintenance and other costs. Otherwise, when the fiscal year begins Thursday, the agency will begin to jettison 80 portable toilets. Some parks, which have permanent restrooms, will not be affected.

Bradford said the agency received a donation this week from a baseball team to pay for a portable toilet at Silver Spring's Nolte Park, and at least five other inquiries were made.

Bradford said she could find the money some other way but would have to lay off three staff members, in addition to the dozens lost to a reduction in force, to pay for the toilets out of her agency's \$69 million budget. The County Council reduced the \$4 billion county budget in the spring for the first time in 40 years, and the parks department, like almost every other agency, had to cut back.

In Congress, proposing the elimination of something such as portable toilets is referred to as the "Washington Monument" strategy, meaning budget cutters outline politically unpopular reductions, and politicians are embarrassed into restoring the money.

But Bradford said that's not her plan.
"This is not a ploy," she said.

Jennifer Hughes, a top aide to County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who spoke by telephone Friday with Bradford, said that it would be "ill-advised" to pull the portable toilets out of the parks next month. "It would be a terrible misjudgment," Hughes said.

She said Leggett thinks that Bradford could move money from one account to another or make other reductions.

Bradford said she thinks she is out of options and noted that her agency had cut seasonal park rangers and is planning dozens of other cuts, such as mowing grass less frequently.

Bradford said she had warned a County Council committee in the spring that she probably would have to get rid of the portable toilets. But she said she understands the fiscal challenges.

"I don't want to blame the County Council," Bradford said. "They have had to make very tough choices in a bad budget year, and it is not their fault."

Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large), a member of the committee that oversees parks, said Bradford's plan caught him and others on the council unaware. He said he had encouraged Leggett's office to come up with funds to pay for the toilets, as recent tax revenue is higher than expected.

Bradford said she is optimistic that the community will volunteer to subsidize the portable toilets.

"We have a wonderful community in Montgomery County," she said. "My hope is the community will rally behind us, helping us to provide these facilities."

The parks agency is overseen by the county Planning Board. Incoming Planning Board Chairman Francoise Carrier, who starts work Monday, said she did not want to comment on the issue.