

Montgomery council slams pay raises for firefighters

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Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett says a few hundred firefighters with advanced paramedic training should receive raises, a proposal that has some County Council members bristling amid salary freezes for the rest of the work force.

During bargaining agreements with county firefighters, Leggett signed off on nearly an additional \$1,000 each a year for paramedics to help fill about 20 vacant positions. The fire department's current paramedics, about 230 employees, also would bank the pay raise.

Fire Chief Richard Bowers implored council members to back the deal Monday, saying it was necessary to keep and attract paramedics and keep pace with neighboring jurisdictions, which offer higher starting salaries for the life support work.

However, council members repeatedly ripped the plan, saying it was a costly fix -- about \$200,000 annually -- to fill less than two dozen positions.

"Chief, no one plays the violin better than you do," said Councilman Roger Berliner, D-Bethesda. "We get it. It's tough. But in order to induce 18 more people to sign up, we are giving bonuses to more than 200 existing employees? There has got to be a more efficient way."

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

According to Bowers, the most recent recruitment class attracted 2,600 firefighter candidates -- but just 10 had obtained the advanced life

support training beforehand. It takes a year for those with basic life support training to complete the advanced courses.

The potential showdown with the county executive is a conundrum for council members, who want to bolster the county's stock of paramedics but don't want to invite more demands for pay raises during another lean budget year.

Leggett already has told departments to brace for 10-15 percent budget cuts next fiscal year and is anticipating at least a \$200 million shortfall.

"My bottom line: We wouldn't be following our own rules if we actually decided to do this," said Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, D-at large, referencing the county's pledge to limit new spending.

If council members ultimately reject the effort, executive officials and union representatives would return to collective bargaining for an agreement.