

# Montgomery County Council votes to keep Ride-on routes

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The Montgomery County Council voted to fully fund the county's Ride-on bus service Tuesday, rejecting County Executive Ike Leggett's proposal to cut a handful of bus routes with low ridership.

Council members said they believed that bus service was a "core" function of county government and the low-income residents who rely on bus service can't afford to lose their sole means of transportation.

"I think we can find other ways to balance this budget," said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin, D-Silver Spring.

But some council members said the county's budget deficit was so dire that the cuts would have to be considered in a few weeks when the council sets the budget for the fiscal year that starts in July.

"Harder times require even harder choices, and we need to start making them," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville.

County officials had previously pegged next year's budget deficit at \$608 million. But Office of Management and Budget Director Joe Beach said a number of factors, including a reduction in speed camera revenues of \$23 million and millions in extra costs for snow removal, were pushing the deficit to \$690 million.

Earlier this month, Leggett backed away from bigger cuts he proposed to the county's bus service after a public outcry over the size of his cuts. Leggett reduced the number of weekday routes that would be cut from nine to three, but kept proposed cuts for weekend routes and reduced evening service for a dozen other routes.

To pay for the restored routes, Leggett recommended the county raise parking fines by \$5, which the County Council approved Tuesday. The council also tapped a cable fund for \$415,000 to fund the rest of the routes Leggett had proposed cutting. The fund, made up of franchise fees from cable operators, has an unanticipated surplus of \$1.4 million.

The County Council also approved almost all of the other \$70 million Leggett had proposed in midyear budget cuts.

They were the second round made by the county this year. The first round of about \$30 million in November was relatively painless, and included not filling open positions, cutting travel budgets and delaying the start of new projects.

But the second round dug much deeper into the county services, which affected a number of residents. The cuts include a \$1 million reduction to the county's libraries, cutting anti-inebriation efforts in Wheaton, and ending a \$150,000 pedestrian safety project.

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