

Accustomed to generosity, Montgomery County struggles with budget limits

By Michael Laris, Friday, March 25, 1:25 PM

Montgomery County prides itself on being a place of ambition, not retreat. It's the liberal home town for many of the men and women who run the nation's affairs, a place with nearly a million people and at least as many aspirations.

But in recent days, in hallways, counseling offices, a chilly Rockville courtyard and beyond, questions about the long-term health of the county government have forced a wrenching and at times surreal conversation about what is possible and what is not in a community accustomed to generosity, not limits.

At a time when public employees unions are fighting for their lives elsewhere in the United States, the munificence of Montgomery's benefits package was captured in an e-mail this month notifying workers, in the understated prose of a Q&A fact sheet, that "the County will no longer cover the cost of purchasing medications used to treat erectile dysfunction (ED)."

Even in the private sector, where many large private employers provide some coverage for drugs such as Viagra, only a small minority do so in Montgomery County style — without limits.

Officials said ending the ED benefit for county government employees, retirees and their families would save \$400,000 a year.

Iris Mersky, a county therapist who has worked for more than two decades counseling victims of assault and the families of those who have been killed, came up against what seemed like a far crueler cut: Her job is slated to be eliminated.

Officials want to consolidate a pair of support programs — one for sexual assault and general crime victims, another focused on domestic violence — by cutting several jobs and saving about \$500,000.

"Forget finding employment for myself. That's secondary. I have lots of skills," Mersky said. "We've got this whole caseload. Many of them have not been in treatment before. They come into this horrible situation, and I provide a framework to help people get through this."

An air of permanence

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) proposed a \$4.35 billion budget this month, representing a slight increase of 1.8 percent. Last year, the budget actually fell,

something that hadn't happened in the wealthy Washington suburb in more than 40 years. But Leggett's current proposal has proved even more unsettling for many, in part because of the cumulative impact of previous cutbacks.

There is also an air of permanence to some of Leggett's proposals that has shaken the preferred narrative in Montgomery, namely that everything is certain to bounce back to the way things were after a few tight years.

But the soaring property values and incomes that helped drive the expansion of Montgomery's generous government services and employee benefits during the boom years are unlikely to return soon, if ever. Taxes are already bumping up against political or legal limits. And the county has yet to set aside billions of dollars needed to cover employee pensions and retiree health-care costs.

Leggett's decision to break with the results of the county's collective-bargaining process, coming amid the intense national debate over fiscal stewardship and employee rights, has sharpened the local rhetoric. Instead of furloughing workers, a temporary step he proposed last year, Leggett is proposing that employees increase what they pay for health-care coverage and retirement benefits. That amounts to a lasting rollback in take-home pay.

Worker protest

More than 200 chanting government workers demonstrated outside the main government office building in Rockville last week, complete with a rented goat named Delilah munching on one of the "wanted" posters emblazoned with Leggett's photograph. "For: Contract Busting & Scapegoating County Workers," it read. "Bring This Fugitive to Justice."

"He's taught law for decades at Howard University. He obviously doesn't know how to read the law," said Gino Renne, head of Montgomery's general government employees union, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994.

Strong assertions

Labor leaders have accused Leggett of being a lawbreaker because he failed to abide by a series of binding arbitration rulings on labor contracts. Montgomery law says Leggett must put enough money in his budget to pay for the benefits and other provisions the arbitrator selects, and Leggett did not do that. Renne said he's planning a legal challenge. But a 2009 ruling, also made as part of the county's collective-bargaining process, found that Montgomery's charter can trump the labor law in certain circumstances, such as an unforeseen fiscal emergency. The charter gives the county executive discretion in crafting a budget, Leggett maintains.

Renne told his local that he's been meeting with members of the County Council, which makes final budget decisions, and they are "taking a reasonable approach." In interviews,

several council members indicated that they are likely to roll back some of Leggett's proposals.

Still, scores of chanting protesters also streamed through the glass doors just outside Leggett's second-floor office during their demonstration Thursday and focused their ire on the county executive. "He's terrorizing my home, my economic situation," said Ride On bus driver Santiago Gonzalez, with his 4-year-old son bouncing on his shoulders. "We can't let him keep stepping all over us. . . . He's taking money away from me and my son."

Leggett said the cuts he's proposed are a reflection of fiscal challenges that will take years resolve.

"There's no way you can do this without this being a painful and difficult process. You have to come to grips with that reality and try to deal with it," he said. "We cannot delude ourselves about the challenge. Yes, things will get better. But they are not going to get better in a manner that we can avoid the decisions we have before us today."

No more Viagra

Some reductions are tougher than others. As for Viagra, Leggett said he learned this year during internal budget deliberations that the pills were covered. "I looked at it. I said, 'They're gone,' " Leggett recalled.

The County Council has the power to decide otherwise.

As for Mersky, she said the end of her part-time job will only make it more difficult for the remaining staff to help crime victims.

"I'm not saying I'm indispensable," she said. "But this is not like closing up a clothes store. I have horrendous cases of people who have lost children to murder. They are all taxpayers. . . . I think we owe it to them."