

Commission recommends eliminating redundancies in Montgomery County government

Savings could total \$30 million in short term, hundreds of millions over time

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County could save at least \$30 million next year by eliminating redundancies within county government and restructuring some core services, a commission reported Tuesday.

The county's Organizational Reform Commission, which formed last year, forecast that hundreds of millions of dollars could be saved over time by altering the way the county government negotiates with employee unions and making other structural changes.

The recommendations already have drawn criticism from at least one union leader, and Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park predicted Tuesday that the council soon would hear from people who wanted to save some of what the commission proposes to cut.

"Whether it's tens of millions, or tens of thousands" of dollars, it all counts, said Councilman Hans Riemer (D-At Large) of Silver Spring. "Every penny is going to count."

Within Riemer's first week on the council in December he voted to cut the county budget by about \$30 million.

Council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac proposed the commission last year in response to the county's unprecedented budget shortfall of about \$1 billion for fiscal 2011 and news that the government's structural budget deficit was out of control.

He said the commission's report was timed so that some of its recommendations could be included in the county's fiscal 2012 budget, which begins July 1. The county is facing a \$300 million shortfall in fiscal 2012.

The commission, appointed by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and the County Council, worked for six months, meeting with county employees, union officials and residents to develop their recommendations.

The eight-member volunteer commission was composed of community leaders, private-sector employees, political officials and at least one former County Councilman, Scott Fosler.

Leggett is expected to submit his recommendations for reorganizing county government to the council by the end of the month. His recommendations could include those made by the commission, but are required to save the county at least the same amount — even if he proposes an alternate plan.

"We will carefully consider all the recommendations made and hope to advance many of the ideas in the report," Leggett said prior to the report's release.

Among the commission's recommendations were to:

- Eliminate the Commission for Women and fold functions into other departments, at a savings of \$800,000;
- Eliminate the Human Rights Commission and fold functions into other departments, \$1.7 million;
- Modernize the government's property management system, unknown;
- Reduce the use of contracted legal services, \$500,000 to \$1 million;
- Blend the Housing Opportunities Commission and the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, unknown;
- Merge park police with county police, \$1.6 million to \$2.2 million;
- Form a Montgomery County Law Office that would serve multiple agencies, unknown.

Proposed changes to collective bargaining appear to be the most controversial recommendation so far. The report suggests making collective bargaining more transparent, altering the selection and criteria to be used by arbitrators in the case of an impasse and making the scope of bargaining consistent for all county agencies.

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The commission also recommends pushing for a change in state law that would allow the County Council to approve or reject pay and benefits provisions in negotiated agreements with Montgomery County Public Schools employees. The council currently has no say in negotiated agreements with school employees, but funds the school system's budget.

Bob Stewart, executive director of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, drew a parallel between the commission's findings and the thinking in more conservative locales.

"With respect to the recommendation on collective bargaining and privatizing particularly liquor control, I was impressed with how a commission composed of people from supposedly liberal Montgomery County leapt right out of the box with their thinking and straight into the heart of red states, like Oklahoma, Alaska and even Carroll County, Maryland, to find legal rationales for further undermining collective bargaining rights for employees," he said.