

MontCo may ban soliciting on medians

By: Natalie Plumb 06/13/11 8:05 PM

The Montgomery County Council plans to vote this month on a bill that would prohibit government employees from soliciting from the median strips on roads, but would hurt the charity efforts of the county's firefighters.

A council committee on Monday discussed a bill that would change a county ethics law that prohibits county employees, while working or in uniform, from standing at a median divider or intersection to solicit money or donations from a driver -- unless approved by the county executive.

Such a change could be bad news for the Fill the Boot campaign, an annual drive by the county's Fire and Rescue employees to raise funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Association by soliciting donations on road medians.

The bill would prohibit roadway solicitation, but would allow employees to collect during work at approved parking lots or other public spaces away from roads.

"These limits on roadside solicitation in neighboring counties were enacted to protect both pedestrians and motorists and to permit the free flow of traffic," said county senior legislative attorney Robert Drummer.

Montgomery County Career Fire Fighters Association President John Sparks said he fears the change would cut nearly 20 percent of the local Muscular Dystrophy Association's budget.

"There's no viable alternative to our roadside efforts," Sparks said in a memorandum.

But council members said the bill is a safety issue.

"This is a law that's a lot simpler than we're making it out to be," said Council member Craig Rice, D-Germantown. "It was designed to protect them and we also need to make sure that our motorists are not distracted. You're doing a great job raising money for a great organization, but your men are violating the law."

Montgomery County Fire Chief Richie Bowers said the bill was unnecessary and would "significantly reduce funds" that Fill the Boot raises. Bowers said safety measures are taken during the campaign that require employees to wear safety vests, openly display signs, and have an appointed intersection captain to watch traffic signals.

He added that since Fill the Boot's Montgomery County chapter began 25 years ago, he has seen no injuries, and heard few complaints.

The campaign raises about \$250,000, or nearly 20 percent of the association's annual budget, Bowers said.

Muscular Dystrophy Association Executive Director Stephanie Goldklang said that in the past 10 years, her office has served about 600 Montgomery County residents, 270 currently.

Bowers said he is open to making adjustments.

"If there are some adjustments that are necessary, that's disappointing, but the last thing we want to do is inconvenience or injure anyone," he said.