

MontCo panel: Cut agencies, open up contract negotiations to save money

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Cash-strapped Montgomery County would save millions of dollars every year by slashing redundant positions, eliminating government agencies and making the collective bargaining process more open, according to a report issued Tuesday by a panel jointly appointed by County Executive Ike Leggett and the County Council.

Among the changes proposed by the Organizational Reform Commission: allow the public to view collective bargaining proposals for union workers, merge the Park Police with the county police department, eliminate the Commission for Women and Commission on Human Rights, and establish an independent revenue authority to oversee the Department of Liquor Control.

"As county government and the social landscape have evolved, it is clear that many of the Commission for Women's activities duplicate those provided by other agencies," the report said. As for the Human Rights Commission, "Recent analysis indicates only a few complaints of human rights violations have been filed regarding rights protected only at the county level."

Eliminating the two commissions would save \$2.6 million annually, and merging the two police forces would net \$2.2 million in savings. Implementing all the changes would save the county roughly \$30 million annually, the panel said.

County officials say tough budget times will force them to implement many of the suggestions.

"These are obviously some very controversial proposals," said Councilman Hans Riemer, D-at large. "But I am optimistic that we will move forward on some of these ideas. Anywhere we can find money, we have to go there. Every penny is going to count."

The commission also targeted the collective bargaining process, where negotiations take place behind closed doors and account for 82 cents of every taxpayer dollar spent. Union leaders say the process needs to remain private so it is not politicized.

The commission, however, said proposals from employee unions should be published online, arbitration hearings should be open to residents and public hearings should be held before the County Council finalizes contracts.

During the past decade, health and retirement benefits increased more than 120 percent, while employee salaries grew 50 percent -- far outweighing both the private sector and state and local governments.

"It's unquestionable that collective bargaining, particularly when budgets aren't tight, has had a huge impact on our spending," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville.

Leggett is expected to present a reorganization plan to the council by the end of February.