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# Montgomery curbs use of take-home vehicles

## Councilman questions whether more should be done

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Three dozen Montgomery employees no longer will be able to take home their county-owned vehicles following an investigation into a practice some elected officials describe as expensive and unnecessary.

However, some council members question whether Executive Isiah Leggett (D) went far enough in reducing the size of the take-home fleet and whether more can be done to prevent misuse of county cars.

“I would like to see more,” said Councilman Hans Riemer (D-At large) of Silver Spring, who initiated the review of take-home vehicles earlier this year.

That review discovered the county was unable to determine the precise cost to taxpayers of the take-home vehicle policy, which, as of March, applied to 269 vehicles not used to respond to public safety emergencies.

Officials announced Monday that 36 vehicles — more than 13 percent — have been eliminated from that fleet. The county pays for maintenance and fuel for employees’ take-home vehicles, but officials have been unable to provide a cost associated with the vehicles.

In fiscal 2010, the county government’s total spending on fuel was \$15.7 million, of which \$4.98 million was spent on unleaded fuel.

Riemer suggested rather than providing take-home vehicles for some employees, they use their own vehicles for government business and be reimbursed for mileage.

In August, the county’s chief administrative officer, Timothy Firestine, said the administration was considering a monthly stipend of as much as \$500 for employees to use their own vehicles. Instead, the county has adopted a more rigorous approval process for take-home vehicles. Firestine, whose take-home vehicle was among those eliminated, will make final decisions about which employees receive cars.

Riemer also suggested the county purchase GPS technology to ensure employees are not using vehicles for personal travel.

David Dise, director of the Department of General Services, said that would be too expensive.

Riemer said the devices would cost about \$100 per vehicle, and pointed out that a 2001 report from the county's Inspector General found the county was owed \$230,000 from employees for using their county vehicles for personal purposes.

"We can't have these cars be a perk," said Council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac. "There wasn't a lot of discipline, and it became a perk."

#### Vehicles for volunteer firefighters

One of the more contentious points in the debate is how to regulate the 46 take-home vehicles used by volunteer firefighters. Those vehicles are owned by volunteer fire companies, but the county pays for fuel and maintenance.

Fire Chief Richard Bowers said Monday more accountability is needed, and he has been working to develop a policy that applies to both career and volunteer firefighters. Such a policy would be subject to approval from the Fire Commission, which includes representatives from the career and volunteer service and the firefighters union.

Nine of the volunteer-owned vehicles are used by people who live outside of the county. Of the 52 county-owned vehicles assigned to career firefighters, 28 are to people who live outside the county.

Eric Bernard, executive director of the county's Volunteer Fire-Rescue Commission, said it's possible each of the 19 volunteer companies has its own policy regarding take-home vehicles. Bowers said no career take-home vehicles are permitted to be used for personal reasons.

Bernard said volunteers have a different definition of on-duty than career firefighters, who have set schedules. Volunteers are on duty constantly and often respond to incidents near their home or work.

Riemer and Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park cited recent examples in which they witnessed Montgomery volunteer vehicles in the District of Columbia on personal business. Riemer said he saw a Silver Spring volunteer vehicle in D.C. on Friday. The vehicle was parked in front of a theater on 14th Street.

"The county should not be paying for that kind of use," he said.

Bowers said he would prefer to use a system known as rostering, in which volunteers would be assigned to specific shifts and considered on-duty during those times.

Bernard said the association generally agrees with Bowers' proposed vehicle policy, but the sticking point is a section of the policy that would allow the county to take ownership

of a vehicle if it pays for gasoline or vehicle maintenance. The county will spend an estimated \$840,000 this year on fuel, maintenance and other costs associated with the volunteer vehicles.

The volunteer service owns 107 vehicles.

Fuel and maintenance for 39 of the volunteers' 46 take-home vehicles are paid with county funds.

Elrich said he plans to introduce legislation that would remove the commission's veto power, giving Bowers the authority to establish the policy.