

Unshackling Montgomery County police

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WHEN WAS IT that the management of the Montgomery County Police Department began to resemble a California commune, circa the Summer of Love? If forced to pinpoint a date, we might say it was April 6, 1982. That's when the County Council adopted a lopsided, staggeringly ill-advised law that gave the police union the almost unlimited right to challenge the most basic management decisions by department officials and tie them up in months or years of negotiations.

Now, after years of preposterous union challenges to no-brainer management directives, the County Council is trying to restore some sanity. It is [set to vote on a measure](#) that would roll back the police union's ability to gum up the works, putting the union on the same footing as the unions representing county firefighters and general government workers

Collective bargaining makes sense when it promotes fair wages, pensions, health benefits, hours and conditions affecting workers' health and safety. But as a result of the 1982 law, the issues open to bargaining in the Montgomery police department are virtually limitless, as a county reform commission concluded this year. For example, when Police Chief J. Thomas Manger directed police officers to check county e-mail once a day — hardly an abusive demand — the union objected, blocking implementation to this day and requiring that the department communicate with its officers by means of printed material.

Similarly, the union blocked Chief Manger's attempts to require that officers type their police reports directly into the department's electronic system — the same move away from paper that offices worldwide have been making for years. It took three years of bargaining, and concessions by the department, to get to an agreement on that.

After an uptick in crime in Silver Spring some months ago, Chief Manger was not even able to ask for volunteers among his officers to beef up deployments there without a fear that the union would object to his move as a "prohibited practice" subject to bargaining.

Just as outrageous, the union was able to handcuff management when it wanted to install technology — intended mainly to protect officers on patrol — enabling the department to continuously track the location of police cruisers. The union demanded, and received, assurances that the tracking information could not be used in any disciplinary proceedings.

There are endless examples of such lunacy in a department otherwise known for its officers' professionalism and responsiveness. As far as county officials could determine, no other jurisdiction in Maryland has enacted a similar law or allowed such a twisted situation to fester in its police department. If ever there were a need for the County

Council to speak unanimously in restoring common sense and balance to a critical agency of government, this is it.