

Maryland counties vow to fight pension shift

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Lawmakers in Maryland counties and Baltimore City vowed Wednesday to fight Gov. Martin O'Malley's plan to shift half of the state's \$900 million pension tab onto counties. County officials say they can't afford to cover the rising cost of the state's underperforming teacher pension program, a problem they point out was caused by the state.

O'Malley has proposed shifting half the pension tab onto counties next fiscal year to help close Maryland's \$1.1 billion budget shortfall in fiscal 2013.

But the proposal could not come at a worse time for counties already struggling with their own budget gaps, according to Prince George's County Councilwoman Ingrid Turner, president of the Maryland Association of Counties, which announced its opposition to O'Malley's plan Wednesday.

"It doesn't just affect education," said Howard County Executive Ken Ulman. "This puts potentially devastating pressure on local government budgets to continue to be able to fund our priorities. These are things that the citizens of Maryland depend on every day." O'Malley has offered several paths to ease the financial pain, but those efforts would last only for the first year, after which officials estimate pension costs will continue to rise annually for years to come, Turner said.

Over the next five years, Montgomery County would be on the hook for \$315 million, the highest amount in the state. Prince George's County would be responsible for \$222.5 million, the second-highest amount, over the same period.

In Montgomery, just \$10 million could cover the salaries of 60 percent of the county's uniformed sheriff's officers for one year, or all the career firefighters assigned to stations in Silver Spring, Kensington and Gaithersburg.

Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker said the county's contributions to the school budget may be slashed, and public safety jobs -- an area Baker promised to preserve without budget cuts -- could be on the chopping block.

Prince George's already faces a \$126 million budget shortfall in fiscal 2013. "Right now our [police department] folks have gone without raises for years," Baker said. "That means there's no way to give raises. In fact, we'd be facing layoffs."

Only Baltimore County officials were absent from a meeting Wednesday afternoon opposing the pension shift. Baltimore County officials told state leaders last week they could support O'Malley's proposal if it were phased in properly and if the extra costs were handled by the school system's budget.