

MontCo lawmakers want to take away Leggett's power on land sales

Rachel Baye

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Several members of the Montgomery County Council are co-sponsoring legislation that would cut back on the power of County Executive Ike Leggett.

When Leggett sold the county's police headquarters to a biotech firm for \$3 million a few months ago, the County Council had no idea until after the deal was signed. To prevent future county land sales from happening without the council's knowledge, four council members are co-sponsoring a bill that would give the legislative body oversight of all sales of county property worth more than \$100,000 and all long-term leases.

"When authority was vested in the county executive, it was envisioned that that authority was going to be used for, if you will, small transactions," said Council President Roger Berliner, D-Bethesda. "The notion that the county executive can have unbridled authority to dispose of significant chunks of assets or lease those assets without effective participation by the County Council ... needs to be redressed."

The bill, which is scheduled to be introduced Tuesday, would give the council oversight of a contentious plan to lease the former Brickyard Middle School site in Potomac to the local MSI Soccer group, according to Council Attorney Michael Faden.

For the last 30 years the land has been occupied by Nick's Organic Farm, and the plan to convert the property to soccer fields has led to a legal battle with area residents.

The residents would welcome additional oversight of the deal, said Keith Williams, president of the Civic Association of River Falls. "The fact that it's been done unilaterally with no input from the County Council is one of the reasons why we think this has been a particularly bad example of county government."

The bill also will give council members input on what happens to the Montgomery County Police Department's Silver Spring district headquarters, an issue of particular importance for Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large, who with Berliner is largely responsible for the bill.

More importantly, it will protect the public against the risk "of a future county executive selling off valuable assets under improper circumstances," Leventhal said.

The council does not have the authority to take over decision making on property sales and leases, according to Leggett spokesman Patrick Lacefield.

"Negotiating a land sale is clearly an executive function," Lacefield said in an email.

"Approving a specific land sale is clearly not a legislative function."

Berliner has a different view.

"If you had the authority all by yourself, would you want to share it?" he asked. "They view it as the executive branch prerogative. I do not."

rbye@washingtonexaminer.com