

In Montgomery, volunteer firefighters getting ready for ambulance fee fight

By Victor Zapana, *The Washington Post*. Published June 26, 2012.

The volunteer firefighters in Montgomery County haven't decided whether to challenge an amended version of a countywide ambulance fee that was struck down by referendum in 2010. But they are getting ready for a fight anyway.

A volunteer firefighter who helped lead the referendum effort two years ago has submitted draft petition language to the county board of elections, which has approved it, according to county documents obtained by *The Washington Post*. The petition would be used to challenge the fee, which was approved by the Montgomery County Council in May.

John Bentivoglio, who is a national health care lawyer and a volunteer firefighter in Bethesda, wrote the petition document and sent it to the board on June 8. Kevin Karpinski, a Baltimore attorney who regularly works with the elections board, inspected the language and offered minor comments, according to a county letter.

The board's approval means that if the volunteer firefighters do decide to follow through with a challenge, they can have a running start with the petition. They'll need it; they are required to submit the completed petition to the elections board by August.

County officials have said they are meeting with the volunteers to persuade them against challenging the law. Volunteer firefighter groups say they oppose the fee partly because it would make residents hesitant to call for assistance. They added that county officials should not resurrect an issue on which voters have already decided.

The ambulance fee is the only county law that has been struck down by the referendum. The fee, which could generate up to \$18 million a year, would be charged to patients for ambulance service, but it would be paid for by health insurance in most situations. People without health insurance and people below a certain income threshold would be exempt from the fee. County officials stress that county residents would neither see a bill nor incur out-of-pocket expenses.

By enacting the legislation, the county again joins the vast majority of local jurisdictions that have the fee. Prince George's, Fairfax and Prince Williams counties have similar fees, while Calvert, Loudoun and Howard counties do not.