

Montgomery seeks to limit take-home cars

Employees take home 349 vehicles; county's 2010 fuel bill nearly \$16 million

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County government could soon provide fewer perks for its employees.

Chief Administrative Officer Timothy Firestine said the county is considering replacing some take-home vehicles with monthly allowances for employees to use their personal vehicles. The county also is considering a similar allowance for employees to use their personal cell phones for work instead of paying the charges for the county's 2,860 employee cell phones.

Firestine said if the changes are made, the county could save money on gasoline, vehicle maintenance and oversight functions. He expects the county also could save money on phones, though officials have not determined how much.

He said County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) would continue to use a county-owned 2007 Jeep Grand Cherokee even if other take-home cars are eliminated.

But Firestine said he would give up his own take-home vehicle, a 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe. Officials are unsure how much the stipends might be, but said they could be as much as \$500 a month.

"You don't have to get into how many miles are personal and how much are business," he said. "You don't have to police that anymore."

He said the ideas are modeled on approaches in Fairfax County, Va., where a spokeswoman said employees are reimbursed for their business travel.

In Montgomery, nearly 300 employees who drive county-owned vehicles receive free gas and vehicle maintenance. But county officials have been unable to provide a cost for the gasoline and upkeep associated with the vehicles.

In fiscal 2010, the county government's total spending on fuel was \$15.7 million.

Firestine said he expects to propose changes in September to the county's take-home vehicle program.

The council's Transportation, Energy and Environment Committee has been studying the issue since April, when Councilman Hans Riemer (D-At large) of Silver Spring inquired about the costs.

This week, he encouraged Leggett's administration to move faster to make changes.

"We're in a fiscal crisis," Riemer said.

Officials reported that 297 employees, including police officers, have take-home vehicles. Another 52 seasonal employees drive county cars.

Of those 349 employees, 249 belong to a union, which would need to be consulted before the county altered the take-home vehicle arrangements, said David Dise, director of the Department of General Services.

"I'm a little nervous about turning these cars into compensation and having them be subject to bargaining," Riemer said. "The program could end up being expanded through the process of bargaining rather than restricted."

The council's focus so far has been on the 96 unrepresented employees driving take-home vehicles — which include senior managers and department directors.

Council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac said he wants to substantially reduce the number of take-home vehicles. Riemer has called for as many as 100 vehicles to be cut from the take-home fleet.

A general services department review already has led four employees to turn in their take-home vehicles, and officials are reviewing whether others need them as well, Dise said.

Firestine said he will now sign off on each vehicle request.

Dise said his department also will be more selective about who receives take-home vehicles. Previous criteria allowed frequent off-site meetings as a justification.

Now, Dise said, employees will have to attend a certain number of meetings in a certain period of time in order to qualify. He would not provide specifics because the changes had not been approved.

After-hours travel, he said, also will no longer qualify employees for take-home cars.

Berliner said the decision to change the criteria is a step in the right direction.

Riemer also suggested selling a few unneeded vehicles and using the money to install GPS tracking systems in all take-home vehicles. He said it's important to know where employees are driving the county vehicles.

“I think a lot of these problems will sort themselves out once it’s clear how these cars are being used,” he said.

He also is seeking information about the number of volunteer firefighters using take-home vehicles. Those vehicles are not included in the numbers from Dise’s office, he said, because the vehicles are overseen by the volunteers — not county government.

“I want to know where every single volunteer firefighter’s county vehicle is,” Riemer said. “The volunteers have a lot of equipment and take-home vehicles that are not needed for public safety.”