

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - October 7, 2010

County Exec using scare tactics to defeat ambulance fee referendum

by Jim Humphrey
MCCF Executive Committee member

Last Thursday, September 29, the Maryland Court of Appeals handed down a ruling that places an ambulance fee referendum on the Montgomery County ballot for the November 2 General Election. This means that voters will have the opportunity to decide whether or not to retain the emergency medical transport fee that was requested by the County Executive and approved by the County Council on May 19 of this year.

Regardless of whether or not one believes the collection of an ambulance fee is needed, we should all be relieved that Maryland's high court has ruled that the will of 50,000 or so voters to place the issue on the ballot should not be thwarted by a County Board of Elections decision to toss out tens of thousands of petition signatures it deemed improper.

But now County Executive Ike Leggett is claiming the loss of some \$12.9 million of expected current fiscal year revenue from the ambulance fee might have to be offset by the elimination of dozens of Department of Fire and Rescue Services employee positions and "destaffing" of eleven emergency medical transport units, which could result in increased response and transport times. Leggett has also proposed that funding of administrative and other costs for county volunteer firefighters, who oppose the ambulance fee, be cut by more than \$1 million.

In his attempt to keep voters from striking down the medical transport fee, the County Executive is sounding more and more like the mob boss in a film noir gangster movie trying to persuade local merchants to pay him protection money. "If youse do not pay me some \$12 to !4 million a year," the script goes, "then I will have to cut back my operation, and cannot guarantee that my boys will be able to send an ambulance when youse might need one."

In addition to threatened cuts in DFRS and volunteer firefighters, Leggett is also proposing to offset the loss of ambulance fee revenues with cutbacks in public library hours, sports programs for at-risk teens, drug treatment programs, and services for elderly residents. This all sounds pretty harsh since what we're talking about is the loss of some three-tenths of one percent of a \$4.27 billion annual county budget.

"Sorry, but my hands are tied," says Big Ike, the gangster movie mob boss. "If youse don't pay me the modest fee I am asking, then I will have no choice but to leave at-risk teens and those with drug addiction problems free to roam the streets. And elderly folks will have to fend for themselves."

This deep concern over the possible loss of \$12.9 million in ambulance fee revenue seems odd coming from a County Executive who just agreed to throw an additional \$3.2 million in county funding into the Fillmore Music Hall deal, on top of the \$4 million we're already committed to the project. Mr. Leggett personally lobbied for and approved the contract which promises the county will fund any cost overruns in creation of the new venue for LiveNation, arguably the most profitable concert production company in history.

And how about the \$4 million the Leggett administration wants to shell out to entice Costco, a hugely profitable national big box retailer, to open a new store in Wheaton Plaza? And isn't this the same county government that paid millions for a site for a new Silver Spring library when it already owned a 3.7 acre site where the current library is located, some three blocks away? And what about the millions of dollars in

property tax waivers or reductions our officials give to corporations, to entice them to locate to, or remain in, the county? Where is the concern for pinching pennies in these instances?

I understand the argument being made by Mr. Leggett, and those supporting the ambulance fee, is that insurance companies, not individuals, will not be billed to reimburse the county for emergency medical transport costs incurred. But I cannot believe that when health insurance companies are dunned annually for \$12 to \$14 million in ambulance fees they will not pass the costs along to the insured in the form of increased premiums. Even if they did not increase premiums across the board in response to imposition of the fee, then insurance companies would likely figure a way to increase the costs of an individual's coverage once a claim is submitted for ambulance transport of that individual. We all know insurance companies raise premiums if claims are made on a home or auto insurance policy. So why should we think it will be different if health insurers face new billing for ambulance transport fees?

In National Park Service circles, the threat to cut critical services such as Leggett is making is referred to as a "Washington Monument play"--when facing a funding shortfall, officials threaten to eliminate something big (like allowing visitors up in the Washington Monument) in order to gain public support for full funding. I expected more of our current County Executive...like a calm and deliberate consideration of where to make the least painful budget cuts possible, if the voters decide on November 2 to eliminate the ambulance fee.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net