

"Federation Corner" column
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A new tax to help fund schools?

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Most residents of Maryland are probably unaware that about two weeks ago legislation was introduced in the State General Assembly to create a new taxing authority. The legislation, House Bill 1352, would authorize "county boards of education to impose, by resolution, a property tax to provide funding for public school operation and expenses," in addition to the county property tax.

The bill was introduced by six members of the Education Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee, including three delegates from Montgomery County--Subcommittee Chair Anne Kaiser (D.-Dist. 14), Eric Luedtke (D.-Dist. 14), and Sheila Hixson (D.-Dist. 20) who, as Chair of the full committee, serves as an *ex officio* member of the subcommittee. The other three cosponsors of the bill, Delegates Branch (D.-Dist. 45, Baltimore City), Ivey (D.-Dist. 47, Prince George's County), and Walker (D.-Dist. 26, Prince George's County).

On March 18, the bill received a first reading by the House Rules and Executive Nominations Committee. Also on that day a motion was made by Delegate Hixson and adopted by the full House (by a vote of 129 to 7) to suspend the rules to allow for late introduction of the bill. Following that vote, the bill was then rereferred to the Rules and Executive Nominations Committee for consideration. Then, on March 22, it was rereferred to the Ways and Means Committee. And on March 24 it was announced that Ways and Means would hold a hearing on the bill on Wednesday, March 30.

Could only residential property owners be taxed under this new scheme, or might commercial property owners also be required to pay this new tax to help fund public school expenses? One can only guess that a board of education imposed property tax would not be subject to the charter limit on property tax annual increases that county residents fought so hard to impose. Still, might there be some limit placed by the State on the amount of property taxes imposed by county school boards, or would it be a case of "the sky's the limit"? The draft legislation offers few answers and many troubling questions.

Would it be wise to give taxing authority to county boards of education, most particularly the Montgomery County Board of Education? After all, this is the body that on March 8, with only five days notice to the public, held a hearing on and then adopted a resolution to negotiate a new lease for the 20 acre future middle school site on Brickyard Road in Potomac (as detailed in the March 10 Federation Corner column titled "County government organically fails to be transparent").

The public was not given an opportunity to examine the proposed lease prior to the Board hearing. And in order to sign up to testify for a few short minutes at weekly MC Board of Education hearings held on Tuesdays, citizens must call the Board's office between 10:30 and 11 a.m. on Monday. Is this the sort of "transparent, citizen inclusive" body that we want to allow to impose, by resolution, an additional property tax on county homeowners?

This column went to press before the March 30 Ways and Means Committee hearing was held or the fate of House Bill 1352 is known. However, Monday, March 28 was "cross over day", the date by which legislation must be approved by one chamber and sent over to the other body in order to be approved by the end of the General Assembly session. So the chances for passage of the bill this year are slim, unless it is "special ordered" for action following the committee hearing. And State Senate President

Mike Miller and House Speaker Michael Busch as much as said the bill stands no chance of approval this year, in interviews televised last week by station WBAL in Baltimore.

So, one must wonder why the bill's six sponsors would stick their political necks on the line and introduce a piece of legislation that would surely meet with widespread opposition from homeowners across the state. Is this an instance of political gamesmanship? Is it a pro-union "shot across the bow" by Hixson, Kaiser, and Luedtke, designed to send a message to County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett and our County Council that if they cut the Montgomery County Public Schools budget so much that it puts teachers' union wage agreements at risk then another way will be found to raise revenue?

I cannot imagine that many of the bill sponsors' fellow General Assembly members in the House and Senate would be willing to risk the future of their political careers and vote to grant a new taxing authority to county boards of education in Maryland. Let's hope so, anyway.

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