

"Federation Corner" column
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Transparency lacking on plan to shift teacher pension costs

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My latest quest for government information began with a deceptively simple question from a neighbor. "I've heard the Governor plans to shift 30% of state teacher pension costs to counties in his proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2013," she said. "What would the cost to Montgomery County be?"

It seemed like a good question. The Governor's proposed budget was released over a month ago. And the media has been buzzing about the issue. So I thought it would be simple to find the answer. Apparently I am the simple one. I did not know that there is an unspoken law about searches for government information: the simpler the question the more complicated the search.

My first thought was to use an internet search engine, and search on the terms "Maryland", "teacher", "pension", and "costs". The search turned up hundreds of items floating about on the web that included those terms, some of them actually related to Governor O'Malley's plan in his proposed FY13 budget (starting July 1 of this year) to shift part of the state's cost for teacher pensions to Maryland counties.

I read articles in four Washington area newspapers related to O'Malley's plan, and one article in a Baltimore newspaper. I read entries on the topic posted on union, association, and citizens' political blogs. I discovered that the total amount the Governor hopes to shift onto counties in FY13 is \$239 million. But I could not find out what the cost to Montgomery County would be in this coming fiscal year, if O'Malley's proposal is approved by the General Assembly.

I did learn that Governor O'Malley is not intending to shift 30% of state teacher pension costs to counties, though. It's a little more complicated than that. At present, counties pay Social Security costs for teachers and the state pays all other pension related costs. What the Governor is proposing is that the Social Security and other costs be totaled together, and that the bill for the combined amount be split equally between the counties and the state.

My search for transparency in government was taking a decidedly muddy turn.

There must be some information on the Montgomery County website, I thought...maybe in a news release from County Executive Isiah Leggett, or on the Department of Finance webpage. Surely somebody in Rockville has calculated the possible cost to the county and posted it. "No, they haven't," came the reply from the worldwide web, "and don't call me Shirley." (Please excuse the *Airplane* reference, but I'm still a little punch drunk from my extended bout with the internet today.)

Undeterred, I headed optimistically to the state government website believing that it must contain some breakdown of costs by county, since state officials have calculated the FY13 cost savings at an exacting \$239 million. No luck. I downloaded and read the Governor's official presentation of the budget to the General Assembly, which took place on January 18. It contained no breakdown by county of the Governor's proposal to assign a portion of teacher pension costs to them.

Finally, like some punch-drunk boxer, I began taking wild jabs at the internet and stumbled on Council member Nancy Floreen's blog (accessible through a click-on marked "blogs" at the bottom of the

Council's homepage). And there I found the following entry, posted on February 7 under the heading "The Real Cost of Teacher Pension Shift".

"What does \$47 million mean to me? 465 jobs. That's right. Under the Governor's plan to shift some of the cost of teacher pensions to local governments, Montgomery County could face a \$47 million burden in the upcoming fiscal year alone. According to our experts, this is equivalent to the salaries for 89 public safety workers, 109 general government workers, 153 new teachers and 114 non-teaching school employees. State legislators are considering this plan now. My message to them: Montgomery County residents and employees are already stretched to the max. We can't take on this cost too."

Here at last was the answer to my neighbor's question. The county "*could* face a \$47 million burden in the upcoming fiscal year alone." Not only had someone in county government calculated the possible cost of the Governor's scheme to Montgomery County, but these "experts" had been busy at work determining this amount was equivalent to the salaries of 465 county workers. I am left to assume that these "experts" then briefed Council member Floreen who, thank goodness, decided to share their findings in a single blog post.

In its February 9 issues, The Montgomery Sentinel carried a news story penned by Brooke Auxier, with Capital News Service, entitled "Maryland lags behind other states in full disclosure". The article relates that in their latest Digital States Survey, the Participatory Politics Foundation gave Maryland a B (on an A to C minus scale).

Jack Murphy, executive director of the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association is quoted in the article as saying that Maryland.gov (the state government's website) isn't well organized, isn't written in plain language, and doesn't feature any frequently accessed databases. Gee, ya think? I simply tried to find out the details of an issue that everyone in the state is buzzing about, and repeatedly hit a brick wall.

God help the residents in other Maryland counties who may not have "experts" tabulating the cost of the Governor's proposed teacher pension shift, or Council members who are forthright enough to share the information with citizens on their blogs. So much for transparency in government.

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