

Howard County Council to vote on \$1.8 billion budget Thursday

Members seek to amend proposed waste hauler fees

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Ahead of the Howard County Council's scheduled vote on the county's \$1.8 billion budget Thursday, council members ironed through dozens of amendments at a Monday work session.

Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman's proposed budget, which includes \$1.5 billion in the operating budget and \$315.7 million in the capital budget, is a modest increase over the current year's budget and slightly reduces spending from general obligation bonds.

The administration's plan to create a new nonprofit center — a project in the works for more than a decade — drew concerns from Councilwoman Jen Terrasa. She expressed reservations about the leasing model behind the effort to house human service organizations under one roof in order to address service silos and increase synergy between organizations.

Terrasa, who strongly approved the plan's intention, questioned its long-term sustainability and sought to ensure measures were in place to maintain maximum

security and cost-effectiveness for tenants.

The county's public housing authority, the Howard County Housing Commission, will act as the master lease owner of the center while the Association of Community Services, a major community service organization, takes a defined leadership role. Tenants would enter into 10-year lease agreements and costs that cover items like technology expenses would be shared.

The administration, which plans on budgeting \$210,000 per year, is fully committed to ensuring the center works, said Diane Wilson, the administration's chief of staff. The budget also includes \$300,000 for one-time startup costs, according to Tom Carbo, the housing commission's director.

Plans for the center, including logistical details that remain pending and were the source of concern Monday, are in the works.

In a separate measure before the council, Councilman Greg Fox and Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty introduced an amendment to the administration's proposal to increase septic waste hauler fees at the Little Patuxent Water Reclamation Plant, which serves the central part of the county, in order to help the county cover

the costs of the program at the plant and close what some council members called a "subsidy" for waste haulers.

"This is definitely not an area we should be subsidizing to the extent that we have," said Councilman Jon Weinstein.

Citing a 2013 study by a consulting firm, Steve Gerwin, the county's Bureau of Utilities chief, said the county charges extremely low fees compared to other jurisdictions and generates roughly \$125,000 from the program but often ends in a deficit because fees do not cover program costs, which include taxpayers dollars for upgrades.

The amendment, which proposes to close the gap by half in the next fiscal year, would increase septic waste fees, which are changed per 1,000 gallons, from the administration's current proposal of \$4.68 to \$14.91, increase traps fees from \$41.58 to \$71.53 and holding tank waste fees from \$4.68 to \$4.84. The fee covers non-residential customers only.

"They may be [Howard County] haulers, but we have no idea from whence they haul," said Sigaty, adding public outreach will be needed to ensure customers are aware of potential changes in the waste haulers' fee structure, which haulers will likely pass on to their customers.

A routine year-end transfer between funding categories by the Howard County Public School System also drew concerns from Terrasa, who objected to moving \$490,000 out of special education into a fixed charges category, which covers items including but not limited to early retirement and benefits.

The county's Office of Law indicated state law limits the council's legal ability to vote for or against the Board of Education's requests for transfers between categories, citing the council does not set education policy.

Overall, council members concurred with the intent of the transfer. Fox said calling the transfer a "cut" mischaracterizes the intention of the resolution.

Still, issues surrounding the education budget drew frustration from some council members like Weinstein who said he was frustrated by "look[ing] at the largest portion of our budget and not [being able] to do very much about it other than stand on a soapbox."

The Council did not discuss any changes to the school system's budget on Monday.

The Council is scheduled to vote on the budget and amendments on the morning of Thursday, May 26.