

Council rejects stormwater fee phase-out

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In a 4 to 1 vote on Monday, the Howard County Council struck down a measure to eliminate the county's controversial stormwater remediation fee, dubbed the "rain tax" by opponents.

Introduced by Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman and Councilman Greg Fox, the measure would have slashed the stormwater fee in half by fiscal 2017 and eliminated it by fiscal 2018. The fee currently brings in \$10 million annually.

The fee phase-out was blocked amid questions on how stormwater remediation projects would be financed without a dedicated revenue source. Council members expressed reservations about the administration's financial plan, which pulled funds from grants, a reserve balance and general obligation bonds, among other sources.

Councilman Greg Fox, the council's lone Republican, was also the only voice of approval. "This issue is far from over," Fox said, adding he was confused by the council's vote to maintain a fee that already does not meet stormwater management needs.

Citing "overwhelming public support" to maintain the fee — a public hearing in January was nearly standing room only — Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty said the administration's financial plan was inadequate.

Without "a clear picture" of cuts required by phasing-out the fee, Councilwoman Jen Terrasa said elimination was not a "prudent" approach. A recent report by the Spending Affordability Advisory Committee cautioned the county to avoid eliminating the fee absent a secure financial plan.

Kittleman called the council's decision a "disappointment."

"The big losers tonight are residents and businesses," Kittleman said, citing what he called overwhelming support for the phase-out based on his interactions with residents. "We'll find out what the next council will do in 2018."

Immediately after it was introduced, the council also struck down a measure introduced by Fox that would "honor" council members who support the fee with a "prominent" footnote on the property tax bill.

Councilman **Jon Weinstein** introduced two measures to modify the county's current fee system, a move he says ad-

dresses concerns on both sides.

In an effort to address the "imbalanced impact" on commercial properties, the measure would bump the maximum fee from 20 percent of property taxes to 15 percent in fiscal 2017, 10 percent in fiscal 2018 and 5 percent in fiscal 2019.

The administration could provide credits to fee payers if the fund balance can accommodate the credit, based on the proposal.

The council also unanimously voted to table Kittleman's bid to reorganize the Department of Citizen Services in order to allow more time to learn how boards and commissions would be impacted, said Council Chairman Calvin Ball.

In addition to other organization changes, the measure aims to sever the Housing Commission from the Department of Housing and Community Development and shuffle the department's responsibilities to a reorganized Department of Citizen Services.

The council also tabled Weinstein and Terrasa's push to create a citizen-funded campaign system if passed by voters. Both sponsors were unable to attend a work session last week to discuss the legislation.

The council unanimously passed a bill

that would allow police to prohibit non-electric cars from parking in spaces designated as recharging stations for electric vehicles. An act passed unanimously in late 2014 but fell short of providing police the authority to impound vehicles.

In another unanimous vote, the council added Haviland Mill Road to the county's inventory of scenic roads. The resolution will likely prompt the council to revisit the county's regulations for designating scenic roads, said Fox, who introduced the measure.

The county's scenic road inventory is old and could provide "false expectations" regarding the value of scenic roads, said Sigaty. "There's a question of whether or not some of the roads [in the inventory] are even scenic," Sigaty said.

At the request of Terrasa, who expressed reservations about a last-minute amendment, the council also tabled a bill to update the county's Fire Protection Code, which was last updated in 2007.

New legislation includes a measure to amend Howard County's water and sewage master plan, which details changes for future facilities and planned service areas.

A public hearing on current legislation will take place March 21.