

# County Council members dive deep into budget



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At 857 pages, it takes some time to go through County Executive Allan Kittleman's proposed capital budget for fiscal year 2016, but that's what the County Council did on Monday, in a meeting that stretched on for more than seven hours.

Combing through the budget, project-by-project, can be enough to make even the biggest budget wonk's eyes glaze over. Inevitably, though — among the seemingly interminable list of mundane slope stabilizations, water main improvements and streetlight programs — a few interesting nuggets always manage to surface.

For example: This year's capital budget doesn't have any funds allocated to road resurfacing. After a few projects funded with money from this fiscal year wrap up, the county's Department of Public Works won't have any more money to fill potholes and patch up pavement, DPW Director

Jim Irvin told the council.

While the county typically needs between \$10 million and \$15 million for road resurfacing, this year's budget didn't have enough surplus funds, called PAYGO, to allocate to those projects, Irvin said.

Council members were concerned.

"I've often heard people compare us to other jurisdictions and hold us up to a higher standard," Councilman Calvin Ball, a Democrat from Columbia, told Irvin. "I'm very concerned you won't have the money to do your job."

"I'm thinking of the roads I drive on [and] the significant impact this particular winter had on them," Jon Weinstein, a Democrat from Ellicott City, said. "Edges of the road are falling into the side of the grass."

Asked whether it was common to cut money from road resurfacing, Irvin said the last time it had been defunded was under County Executive J. Hugh Nichols, who served from 1978 to 1986, although more recent county executives have made reductions.

When asked about the funding, however, administration officials said Kittleman

is being more transparent by listing the fund balance for repaving at zero. Normally, they said, county executives dip into the fund for other purposes without reflecting those transfers on the initial budget.

## Bridge Columbia

A long-discussed project to widen the pedestrian bridge connecting the Columbia villages of Town Center and Oakland Mills across Route 29 also took a turn under the magnifying glass.

The project, dubbed "Bridge Columbia" by supporters, is not funded in the FY 2016 budget, though Kittleman has penciled in \$750,000 for the bridge in fiscal 2017.

At that funding level, according to Department of Public Works Assistant Director Holger Serrano, "it looks like it's going to be a pedestrian bridge, not a transit bridge," though he clarified the project is "really preliminary" and not ready to move forward.

Kittleman plans to hold a round table soon to discuss ways to garner more

money for the project, according to Irvin.

## Reclaiming biosolids

Some of the budget's most expensive line items are far from the sexiest.

While Kittleman's capital budget news release highlighted new libraries, fire stations and stormwater improvements, those projects are just a fraction of the budget's biggest expenses. Taken together, the funds allocated to water and sewer projects account for nearly half of the \$342.9 million proposal.

One of the priciest will be the design and construction of new biosolids processing facilities at the Little Patuxent Water Reclamation Plant in Savage. The project — which will set the county back \$84 million, or nearly a quarter of the entire capital budget — will essentially dry the county's sludge to the consistency of fertilizer. The resulting 70 percent reduction in volume will make it easier to store and ship to places that don't have Maryland's problems with high nitrogen levels, according to Irvin.