

Budget question heading to ballot

If approved, council would get more power to shift funds

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A move to expand the Howard County Council's authority over the county budget will head to public balloting in November.

The measure, which passed in a 4-1 council vote Friday, would allow the council to move money it cuts from the executive's budget into two categories: the county's pension fund or the county's reserve fund.

The council's lone Republican, Greg Fox, voted against the measure.

Fox and County Executive Allan Kittleman, also a Republican, lashed back at the proposed charter amendment.

Kittleman called the move, which would change the county's charter, "a solution looking for a problem."

"The current system has worked well in the county and is consistent with how the state and other local counties handle their budgets," Kittleman said.

"If the council deems a project not worthy of funding, then it should reduce taxes, not put the funds in a redundant contingency account," Kittleman wrote in a statement.

Fox, who agreed with moving money for retiree benefits, said the change could cause a "train wreck," and lead to relentless "political football."

He questioned why Democrats on the council sought the changes when the council unanimously approved Kittleman's past two budgets.

Councilman Jon Weinstein, who proposed the measure because of frustrations with the council's limited budget authority, fired back Friday.

"This is not a political maneuver," Weinstein emphatically said after contentious back and forth with Fox. "This just makes sense."

Currently, the council can only reduce the executive's budget by either moving funds to the school board, up to the amount requested by the board, or by decreasing taxes.

Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty, who also proposed the change, said the charter amendment was necessary to "create a more robust conversation" between the council and the executive.

Also at the voting session last week, the council unanimously tabled all plans to redevelop downtown Columbia to September.

The council also passed regulations for new fueling stations in the county.

The measure, passed in a 4-1 vote after nearly two years of debate on how to incorporate new stations to keep up with changes in the industry, was stripped of a provision that set limits on distances between stations.

Sigaty pushed for the change, which she said exclusively targets her district, which covers parts of Columbia.

Overall, the new regulations are a

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slimmed-down version of recommendations made by a task force directed by the council to study the issue.

Meagan Braganca, chairwoman of the county's Sierra Club, said she was disappointed the regulations only set a 100-foot minimum between stations and flood plains, streams and rivers.

The measure requires fuel stations to be at least 300 feet from places like schools and parks; increases the distance of stations from public roads; and doubles the minimum size of stations to the modern model of 40,000 square feet.

Fox, who voted against the measure, said he was concerned it didn't account for multiple sources of fuels and could inadvertently hurt some fuel station owners, some of whom may be unaware of the changes.

Council Chairman Calvin Ball said he was confident future concerns, should they arise, could be addressed through zoning amendments.