

POLITICAL NOTEBOOK

Auditor: Council should have more budget flexibility



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A new set of recommendations from Howard County's auditor proposes to update the budget process to make it easier for citizens to track changes and to give County Council members the flexibility to move funds between projects.

Auditor Craig Glendenning submitted the proposal to the council

at the body's November monthly meeting, on Monday. Council members had asked him to review previous budget cycles and make recommendations for how the county could improve, according to Councilman Calvin Ball, a Democrat from Columbia.

Under the suggestions, future capital project summary pages would include more detailed funding information, such as prior appropriations and budget requests, and would list each program year by funding source.

The recommendations would also help

citizens track adjustments to capital projects by including a "changes from prior year" section on every project summary page identifying the reasons for cost increases and cuts, as well as changes in the project's completion date and scope. An "initial project cost estimate" section would highlight when the project was first planned and how much it was expected to cost at the time.

Also among Glendenning's suggestions are several proposals to expand the council's authority when it comes to changing the budget's funding priorities. Currently, if council members decide to cut funds from a project, that money can only go toward decreasing tax rates, according to council chairwoman Mary Kay Sigaty, a Columbia Democrat. The council cannot increase the budget, by county law.

Glendenning recommends changing the county's charter to give council members the authority to move dollars to the county's pension fund, general fund contingency and rainy day fund. Another suggestion allowing the council to shuffle funding sources among capital projects

would give council members the ability to restore funding to Board of Education projects, if the board's requests are not fully met by the county executive.

A last recommendation would give council members "position control," meaning they would need to approve any change to the number and classification of government positions recommended in the county executive's budget.

Glendenning, who previously worked for the Anne Arundel County auditor's office, said the suggestions were inspired by changes he pushed there.

Council members welcomed the recommendations.

"In my first year, quite honestly, I was a little surprised ... and slightly disheartened by the inability for flexibility for the county and the council to adjust to changes that occur in our economy or as priorities change," said Councilman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat from Ellicott City and the newest member on the council.

Sigaty called the council's lack of budgeting flexibility "one of my greatest frustrations" and said she sees the value in being able to move money into the

pension and rainy day funds.

Howard Budget Director Holly Sun said some of the budget-tracking recommendations would be difficult to implement right away.

"It is going to be time-consuming, but we will work with [county] agencies," she said.

Through a spokesman, County Executive Allan Kittleman declined to comment on the proposal until he has had a chance to review it.

Changing the council's authority over the budget would require a charter amendment, according to the county's Office of Law, but some budget-tracking changes could be implemented more quickly.

Sigaty said she hopes to work with the administration on any adjustments to the budget process.

"If we have to change the county code, yeah, we might change the county code," she said, but, "in this, we're looking for more transparency, we're looking for a working relationship, and ultimately, when we find something that works, we'll change the code to what works."