

# County Council passes fiscal year 2016 budget unanimously

## Elkridge library, senior center projects funded

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The Howard County Council voted unanimously on May 22 to adopt capital and operating budgets for fiscal year 2016, which total about \$1.4 billion combined.

This year's budget reels in the county's borrowing by \$24 million while funding a long-awaited library and senior center for Elkridge, new mental health initiatives and construction of an elementary school in the east, among other projects.

Council members agreed on most of the tweaks they made to the budget proposed by County Executive Allan Kittleman, which largely remained intact. But two of the council's Democrats argued schools—which received a total of \$776 million in state and county funding—should have been given a little more.

An amendment from Council members Calvin Ball, of east Columbia, and Jen Terrasa, who represents the county's southeast, sought to move \$7 million from the county's annual other post employment benefits, or OPEB,

contribution to pay for renovations to Oakland Mills Middle School, fund new playground equipment and provide some money for teacher raises.

Howard County Public Schools Superintendent Renee Foose told the council last week that the school system didn't have room in its budget to fund a pay step or cost-of-living increase for its staff this year. The school system and teachers' union recently declared an impasse in negotiations over salary and benefits for next fiscal year.

"I think this one's an important one," Terrasa said of the proposal. "While certainly it's not a huge amount of money to add to the school system, it's all that we can do."

Ball and Terrasa's amendment also sought to change a decision by Kittleman to allocate proceeds from a property sale to the education operating budget. Traditionally, one-time revenue is used in the capital budget for brick-and-mortar projects, rather than to meet operating expenses such as salaries and pensions, which are a recurring commitment.

Ball said he and Terrasa wanted to "address a concern expressed by all council members about the fiscal practice of using one-time capital funding for ongoing operating costs, something that I don't believe we've ever done as a county and that some might deem as

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Greg Fox,  
County Council

fiscally irresponsible."

The remaining three council members, however, said they were concerned about cutting down the county's OPEB contribution, which totaled \$10 million in Kittleman's proposal.

"We're in a position where we've been kicking the can down the road," said Councilman Greg Fox, a Fulton Republican.

Council Chairwoman Mary Kay Sigaty, a Democrat from west Columbia, agreed. "We're further behind than we want to be, we're further behind than our plan called for," she said. "We have an obligation."

Sigaty and Fox were joined by Councilman Jon Weinstein in voting against Ball and Terrasa's proposal.

Another last-minute change to the budget allotted \$100,000 in funding for the Patapsco Heritage Greenway, a local group charged with promoting the historical and environmental heritage of the Patapsco Valley, which straddles the

line between Howard and Baltimore counties.

This year's budget provided \$6.7 million to keep construction of a new library and senior center for Elkridge on track, \$2.8 million for a new elementary school in the eastern county and funding for 101 new educators.

The Inner Arbor project in downtown Columbia is getting \$14 million, which will support the first phase of the park's construction.

Also included in the budget is funding for a new police academy class and \$250,000 for three new mental health initiatives.

Not every proposal was as lucky: projects that did not receive new funding in fiscal year 2016 include a pedestrian and transit bridge connecting downtown Columbia to the village of Oakland Mills (\$750,000 has been penciled into next year's budget for the bridge) and road resurfacing projects across the county.

Friday afternoon, Kittleman said he was pleased with the council's vote.

"I submitted a lean, sustainable budget to the County Council for FY 2016, which was balanced, yet funded our shared priorities," he said in a statement. "I am confident that we are prepared for future challenges and the county will head into Fiscal Year 2016 on sound fiscal footing."