Gazette
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Commentary

Where does the buck stop?

Harry Truman took pride in a plaque on his Oval Office desk that read "The buck stops here." But that was a long time ago. Today, President Bush and, on the state level, Gov. Robert Ehrlich, have turned that aphorism on its head. To them, the buck stops "there" — at local government.

Like many other local governments, Montgomery County has had to step up to the plate and fill funding shortfalls and mandates passed on to us by the feds and the state.

Why do we do it? Why don't we just throw up our hands, rubber-stamp the shortfalls, and blame the other guys?

Maybe it's because of the working poor family who needs child care help in order to get or keep a job. Or the pre-schooler or kindergartener who is 4 or 5 years old only once and can succeed if they are given the chance to be educated in a preschool program or full-day kindergarten. Or the student who has spent most of his or her elementary school career in a portable. Or perhaps it's the commuter stuck in traffic who would switch to transit with just a modest incentive; or would take Metro if they could park in a garage.

Steven Silverman

Montgomery County is a good place to live, work and raise a family. But it didn't get that way by accident. Over many years we have invested our resources to ensure a world-class school system, an award-winning county parks system, and a diversified economy on the cutting edge of innovation.

All that can be lost, however, if we don't maintain these investments.

Witness our current budget, just approved for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

First, we incorporated millions in budget cuts that were included in mid-year budget savings plans over the past two years.

Then we addressed the gaps left by Gov. Ehrlich: $15 million in Thornton commission funding for education, tens of millions in school construction aid, $10 million in county monies "borrowed" from the state Transportation Trust Fund, and cuts in child welfare, substance abuse, and mental health.

Put plainly, Bob Ehrlich punted — and pulled his team off the field. We didn't have that choice.

Instead we fully funded our schools budget, expanding full-day kindergarten to an additional 17 schools. We restored hours of operation and staffing to libraries, added an additional fire recruit class, restored after-school programs for at-risk youth, and increased frail elderly home care and senior transportation. We accelerated road planning and funded more transit incentives to encourage commuters to get out of their cars.

In our capital budget, we increased our school construction by 43 percent over the next six years and boosted spending on traffic congestion relief by nearly 15 percent.

Moreover, we included nearly $11 million in property tax relief — giving back some of the $30 million county taxpayers paid with Gov. Ehrlich's five-cent property tax increase of last year.

How did we do it? By increasing the county energy tax, which falls mostly on businesses and on federal facilities that otherwise go untaxed by the county. Coupled with the property tax cut, the homeowner with a $300,000 home will pay only $7 more annually.

No one likes raising taxes — any taxes. But when local governments are left holding the bag by the feds and the state for critical needs in education, transportation, and our social safety net, the math is easy.

Steven Silverman, a Democrat, is an at-large member of the Montgomery County Council and serves as council president.

Residents will notice results under county's transportation budget

W. Post

Nancy Floreen

Commentary

6/23/04

The County Council passed a budget that includes a major transportation package with improvements residents will notice.

We took the county executive's proposed budget, added significant resources to essential elements, and then committed an additional $7.5 million package to address our traffic crisis. These decisions resulted in the single largest increase to address congestion in more than 15 years, funded principally by the energy tax increase.

It's gratifying that the state supports the Intercounty Connector and has added the funding for our top local intersection project, Rockville Pike at Montrose Road. But these improvements won't be visible for a number of years. The council's budget will have a more immediate impact on our residents' lives.

On the operating side, we've upped the ante on maintenance, signal optimization and, most significantly, transit services. This budget added $2.6 million to the recommended budget for a total of over $126 million for basic transportation operations and transit. These dollars will pay for a great deal of resurfacing, for widening and upgrading choked intersections, and for enhancing the automated traffic management system so traffic signals are better coordinated and accidents or breakdowns can be moved out of travel lanes quickly.

We added money for pedestrian safety initiatives such as crosswalks, raised pavement markers and countdown traffic signals. And residents will see construction of new sidewalks, repairs to older ones and improved bike trail maintenance.

These initiatives were all important, but they weren't enough, and they didn't target relief to our No. 1 problem — traffic congestion. So I along with Council President Steve Silverman proposed, and our colleagues supported, additional dollars focused on transit options and road capacity. Most of our package will go toward making transit more frequent, more accessible, and less expensive:

•We will provide free bus rides weekdays on 15 Ride On routes, including several cross-county routes and in some of our most congested areas, such as the Route 29 and Interstate 270 corridors.

•We will purchase seven new small Ride On buses for congested neighborhoods and six more compressed natural gas buses to increase bus frequency on current routes while simultaneously improving air quality.

•We are extending the a.m. and p.m. hours buses will run on five heavily traveled routes and adding four new weekend routes.

•We added significant funding to the transit subsidy programs known as Fare Share and Super Fare Share, to match employer contributions and encourage more commuters to use public transportation and leave their cars at home.

On the capital side, the council added $67 million to the county executive's recommended budget, for a total of $521 million. This is almost a 15 percent increase over the six-year Capital Improvements Program approved by the last council. On top of that, our targeted package also:

•Accelerates facility planning for Snouffer School Road, Watkins Mill Road Extended, and Observation Drive, moving these roads up three years. We also moved up construction funds for the Montrose Parkway, Father Hurley Boulevard, and the Burtonsville Access Road projects. These roads will help relieve congestion that much sooner.

•Builds the Glenmont garage within the next two years to get drivers onto the Red Line and off Georgia Avenue.

•Constructs the Metropolitan Branch Trail in Takoma Park, the Stewart Avenue Trail Connection in Silver Spring, and the Matthew Henson Trail in Aspen Hill for cycle commuters.

I believe this transportation budget takes a big step toward reducing congestion, significantly improving transit options, and addressing air quality.

Nancy Floreen, a Democrat from Garrett Park, is an at-large member of the County Council and chairwoman of the Transportation and Environment Committee.