

Councilman says contract with firefighters too costly

by Douglas Tallman

Staff Writer

Improved retirement benefits have pushed the costs of a proposed firefighter contract so high that the Montgomery County Council should reject it, a councilman said Monday.

But more than the dollars in the bottom line, Philip M. Andrews said he objected to the contract because the retirement plan would mean the county would lose experienced firefighters.

"We want firefighters, at the peak of their careers, to stay, not leave," said Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg.



Andrews

The three-year contract would allow members of the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1664 to retire after 20 years instead of the current 25.

John Sparks, president of Local 1664, defended the contract by saying that after 20 years, most firefighters are hardly at their peak, suffering from bad knees and weak backs. Some are not physically able to go the five years between their 20th and 25th anniversaries, he said.

"For those firefighters that are beat up, it gives them an opportunity to retire," Sparks said.

The firefighters would be the first Montgomery County government employees union to win 20-year retirement. If the council approves the contract, other unions would seek similar provisions when their contracts come up for renegotiation, Andrews said.

"It'll be difficult to say no to

them if we say yes to the firefighters," Andrews said at a Monday news conference.

Reached after the news conference, Sparks said 20-year retirement plans are offered in other Maryland jurisdictions, including Prince George's, Anne Arundel and Howard counties, and Baltimore city.

To remain competitive for applicants, Montgomery needs to offer a similar plan, Sparks said.

Under the current contract, firefighters can retire at 60 percent pay after 25 years. The new contract would allow retirement at 50 percent pay after 20 years.

Andrews is one of three members of the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee, which is expected to vote on a contract recommendation Thursday. The full council is scheduled to vote on ratification on April 26.

If ratified by the council, the contract would take effect July 1. If the council does reject the contract, members would choose a negotiator to represent the council in further talks.

Andrews called the contract "radical" and its costs "extraordinary."

The contract, negotiated between the Duncan administration and Local 1664, includes twice-a-year raises from July 2005 to July 2007: 3 percent this July, 1 percent in January 2006, 4 percent in July 2006, 1 percent in January 2007 and 5 percent in July 2007.

The county's Office of Management and Budget estimated the cost of the contract to be \$40.6 million, and the retirement option, which would take effect in the third year of the contract, to be \$4.5 million.

The raises will cost the county \$4.1 million in fiscal 2006, \$15 million in fiscal 2007 and \$21.5 million, according to the OMB analysis. Fiscal 2006 begins July 1.