

Council will cut taxes, meet important needs

As the County Council enters the stretch run of this year's budget process, lots of attention seems to be focused on one number: the \$67 million in cuts needed for the county to come in at the charter limit on property tax revenue.

Property tax relief is important. The council will certainly do more across-the-board relief than the county executive's proposed 2-cent rate reduction. And we believe the council will add to that targeted tax relief for seniors and others on fixed incomes who may be house-rich but cash-poor.

But there are a lot of other numbers the council ought to look at in weighing tax relief versus critical services:

- \$12.1 million — promised state education funds we won't be getting.
- \$2.2 million — promised state transportation funding we won't be getting.
- \$28 million — promised federal funds for special education that we are shortchanged on annually.
- \$786,000 — added cost to the

county for health care costs for 1,300 children and 400 pregnant women cut off by the state.

- \$2 million — added cost to the county to replace federal and state funds for juvenile programs and substance abuse initiatives.

- \$30.3 million — the increase in health care costs for county employees and retirees over last year (12 percent).

- 10 years — how far behind the county is in resurfacing county roads.

- 200,000 — number of county trees in the backlog of trees that need trimming.

- 2,000 — number of county residents on waiting lists for English classes.

Some offer the charter limit number as the goal we should strive for above all else. But the charter limit only takes into account a "market basket of groceries" (the Consumer Price Index) in providing for increases from one year to the next. And the charter explicitly allows seven council members to use their best judg-

ment, recognizing the many other factors that define the needs of our growing community.

It's penny-wise and pound-foolish to shortchange our kids' education. That's an investment well worth making — in our personal budgets as well as in the county budget. When a roof is leaking or your car is on its last legs, delaying needed spending can end up costing you more in the end. Ditto with county government when it comes to maintaining our roads and trees and facilities and investing in at-risk children.

There really is no such thing as a free lunch. In the past, county residents have recognized that you get what you pay for. Quick-fix property tax referenda promoted by those who want instant tax relief — and quality public services be damned — have gone down to defeat, most recently last November, and by the biggest margin to date.

We need to do substantial property tax relief and preserve the critical services that are the very foundation of our county's success. The easy road would be to curry public favor by just slashing taxes. But that wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be smart. And we're not about to do that.

We were elected to balance out competing goals and needs and make the hard choices. We can cut property taxes and meet important needs. And that's just what we'll do in the two weeks remaining before the council adopts its final budget.

Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park is County Council president; **George L. Leventhal** (D-At large) of Takoma Park is council vice president; **Steven A. Silverman** (D-At large) of Silver Spring is a council member.