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Bearable Pain

THE WEARY adjective affixed to budget cuts is that they are "painful," but in Montgomery County the pain is bearable. Forgoing fake grass for five fields in the county parks would trim \$700,000 from County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's bountiful \$3.6 billion proposed spending plan. Holding the line on subsidies for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the National Philharmonic, rather than increasing them, would save \$300,000. Add 30 police officers to the county force instead of 52, and you shrink Mr. Duncan's blueprint by \$944,000 (and much more than that in subsequent years). Plenty of city and county governments in America would be only too happy to withstand that kind of "pain."

In fact, the striking thing about Mr. Duncan's budget is that not one of the nine members on the County Council is supporting it; all of them, the austerity-minded and the more profligate, agree there is too much spending and not enough effort to limit tax increases. The main disagreement is one of degree. After weeks of complaints, letters and e-mails from constituents, council members are getting the message that come election time, voters may not embrace spending increases that dwarf the rate of inflation and a county workforce growing faster than the county itself.

Mr. Duncan (D), who is preparing to run for governor, evidently believes that his interests

are served, and his political base solidified, by a blueprint that bestows the county's riches far and wide. Jutting his jaw at the council, he is resisting suggestions that his budget could be leaner. An e-mail sent from his office warned community groups that "nothing in the budget is safe" from the council's cost-cutting predations. In going to the mat for a spendthrift budget — and specifically inviting public pressure on the more aggressive budget-cutters on the council — Mr. Duncan is sending the wrong message to the county and to the state.

Among themselves, council members have joined a constructive debate about how much to cut. Specifically, they are arguing about whether they should stick to the county charter's limit on spending, which allows for an increase commensurate with the rates of inflation and growth in property value. Hewing to the charter limit would mean reducing Mr. Duncan's budget proposal by about \$67 million and holding down increases in property taxes. So far, council committees have identified cuts in future spending that constitute scarcely 1 to 2 percent of Mr. Duncan's budget; they have not laid a finger on the schools, which account for half of the county's outlays. No one is advocating taking a machete to the county budget or its excellent schools and services. But it's not yet clear that a machete would be needed to produce a budget that grows with inflation but not more.