

Maryland Community News

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Conferences, new website among plans to pitch Montgomery to businesses

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Plans to market Montgomery as a top community in which to do business are moving too slowly, some County Council members told the head of the department that oversees economic growth efforts.

"When are we going to get going?" asked Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, during a meeting Monday in Rockville.

Among her complaints is the time it has taken to update the website for the county's economic development department, overseen by Steven Silverman. Recently, the website's address has been changed to "theidealocation.com." That address redirects to the Department of Economic Development site.

"We have talked about the website for five years," she told Silverman. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I just want this to start happening. And I want you to make it happen."

An update to the website is expected to be completed by January and is part of the department's \$500,000 marketing plan for fiscal 2012.

On Monday, Silverman released his plans to spend that money, saying about \$130,000 will be used for staff to attend 19 conferences, trade shows and showcases in the U.S. and abroad. Silverman plans to send as many as five people to the four-day Bio International Convention in Boston in June at a cost of \$60,000. The county's representatives will join state officials at the conference.

The county also plans to send staff to the State Science and Technology Institute Annual Conference in Columbus, Ohio, (\$1,500 per person); the Medica conference for the health care industry in Germany (\$4,000 per person); Bio Europe in Amsterdam, Netherlands (\$5,000 per person); BLOKOREA (\$4,000 per person) and JP Morgan 30th annual Healthcare Conference in San Francisco (\$3,600 for two people to attend).

"It looks like you're attending a lot of conferences," said Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, who questioned what benefit the county gets from the trips.

Silverman said economic development primarily is about networking and building relationships, and the county's presence at trade shows and conferences is important. A diminished marketing budget for his department — which once was about \$1 million — has prevented the county from having presence at many conferences for the past several years.

"This is where people hang out," Silverman said of the conferences. "Nobody is staying at high-end hotels. And most of what is here is airfare and conference fees. None of these conferences are inexpensive."

The department also plans to market the county through a media plan that includes an eight- to 16-week radio advertising campaign, a promotional video on the county's website and an electronic letter to business executives. Details were not available about who would receive those materials.

Silverman told council members he does not expect County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) to include additional money for marketing in his fiscal 2013 budget, to be released next year. In fact, if Leggett proposes mid-year budget cuts for fiscal 2012, this year's marketing funds will be reduced.

"If there is a savings plan, the marketing money is going to be the first thing that's touched," Silverman said, because the funds do not pay for personnel.

There are no current plans for mid-year budget cuts, according to the county's Director of the

Office of Management and Budget Jennifer Hughes. However, she would not rule one out for this year.

"Everything is a possibility," she said. "If people are smart, they might be thinking what if."