

# MontCo Council puts target on police union, disability benefits

By: [Brian Hughes](#) 06/04/11 8:05 PM

Montgomery County officials are set to rein in disability benefits for police officers and are aiming to restrict bargaining powers for its influential union, punctuating a tumultuous relationship between politicians and labor leaders in the liberal bastion.

A majority of the County Council told *The Washington Examiner* they would vote for a multitiered disability system for police officers amid concerns about lacking oversight of such pensions and after few changes to the scrutinized program during negotiations with unions.

Disabled police officers and general government employees currently receive two-thirds of their salary in a tax-free pension each year regardless of the extent of their injuries. A two-tiered system, as introduced by Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville, would distinguish payouts to workers based on the severity of injuries.

And perhaps even more consequential, some council members say they would like to fundamentally alter the scope of the police union's bargaining power, which under the current arrangement forces the police chief to essentially clear the allocation of resources and personnel decisions through the union first.

Andrews, who said 90 percent of disability claims are orthopedic, said of so-called "effects bargaining" with the Fraternal Order of Police: "None of the other unions here have it. It's a serious weakness in the development of the police department."

Police Chief Thomas Manger did not respond to calls for comment, but multiple county officials told *The Examiner* that Manger privately pushed for the elimination of the arrangement, saying he felt hamstrung by its restrictiveness.

Andrews said Manger was forced to go through the union to reassign police officers and pointed to the nearly decade-long delay in placing cameras in squad cars as proof of the red tape that comes with effects bargaining.

The disability revisions are scheduled to be taken up by the council next week. It comes on the heels of a raucous budget battle with unions that culminated when cops showed up at the council's Rockville building

dressed as clowns to mock the elected officials, who reduced their pension and health care benefits.

Now unions say they are being punished for the spectacle -- Fraternal Order of Police chief negotiator Walt Bader said "it reeks of vindictiveness" -- a claim that has support within some corridors in county government.

"I've got to be honest," said Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large. "The County Council -- council leadership in particular -- is on the warpath against public employees. We should not be making public policy because we're mad."

However, Council President Valerie Ervin dismissed claims of retaliation, saying the council has long been scheduled to take up disability changes.

The two-tiered system has been discussed by county officials for years.

In a recent three-year period, more than 60 percent of police officers retired with a disability pension -- far eclipsing surrounding jurisdictions.

"It's got problems," Ervin said of the disability program. "We've got to fix it. Whatever that means, I'll support it."