

MontCo lawmakers kill peace bill

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Council decides request to cut defense funds 'unwise'

After months of lobbying by county peace activists, several members of the Montgomery County Council drafted a resolution calling for the Pentagon to drastically cut military spending and "end wars abroad." But that measure has been spiked after the county's largest defense contractor made its displeasure known and Virginia began courting that contractor.

The County Council was scheduled to vote Tuesday on the resolution, which asks Congress to shift funding from the Pentagon budget to roads, education and health care across Maryland. Council President Valerie Ervin, who introduced the measure, said the vote would no longer happen because it doesn't have enough support to pass.

"A different military strategy and an end to the wars abroad would free up hundreds of billions of dollars," the resolution said.

But County Executive Ike Leggett asked the council to table the resolution because it is "a dagger pointed directly at the heart of Montgomery County."

The episode provided a glimpse into the conflicted dynamics within the county council. Less than a week ago several members were proud to sign the resolution that displayed their progressive credentials, even if it had no chance to actually end wars or starve the Pentagon. But in a time of anemic jobs growth that has seen Montgomery fall off the list of the nation's ten richest counties, the matter proved more complicated.

After the council introduced the measure Tuesday, the lawmakers saw a backlash from Bethesda defense giant Lockheed Martin, the nation's largest defense contractor. And government officials said Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell would use the resolution to convince Lockheed to move its headquarters to Virginia.

With 5,200 employees in Montgomery County, Lockheed Martin is the largest private-sector employer in the county.

"It didn't seem terribly constructive in trying to establish ourselves as a great business climate," said Maryland Del. Bill Frick, D-Bethesda, who called Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large and a sponsor of the resolution, to explain why the resolution was a bad idea.

Virginia is actively trying to recruit Lockheed, Frick said, and the resolution gave McDonnell another recruiting tool. McDonnell spokesman Jeff Caldwell would not confirm rumors that the governor spoke with Lockheed in reaction to the resolution. But he said, "Virginia works very hard to attract military spending" and monitors political activity in other states to see when a company might want to relocate.

"If there's a company that's looking to relocate, we take an active role in doing that," he added.

Lockheed Martin called Councilman Craig Rice, D-Germantown and a sponsor of the resolution, to discuss the contractor's priorities, how the company is affected by cuts to federal funding and how the county can do more to help Lockheed grow, Rice said.

Lockheed Martin spokesman Chris Williams declined to comment.

The resolution, which has no power since Congress controls military spending, was initially reported in the Washington Examiner. It was the result of eight months of lobbying by activist group Peace Action Montgomery, Ervin said.

Peace Action Montgomery head Jean Athey did not return requests for comment.

The council members who initially supported the resolution say they still support the message behind it.

The resolution aimed to refocus federal funding discussions away from international wars toward "funding for the homeless or our kids," Rice said. But "because people misunderstood the resolution, it might not be the right recourse," he said.

Leventhal said he agreed with some of the ideas in the resolution but called his decision to sponsor it "unwise" because of the uproar that resulted. "It is generally better for us to leave the federal legislating to the federal legislators," he said.