

Montgomery Co. firefighters can ‘Fill the Boot,’ but do it off the road

By Editorial, Published: June 20

IT’S A SIMPLE proposition that on-duty public employees in Montgomery County — we repeat, *on-duty* — should not be plying jammed suburban roadways on foot soliciting cash from drivers for private causes, no matter how worthy. The reasons are equally clear: It’s dangerous and distracting for drivers and fundraisers alike; it’s illegal to wander among cars halted at red lights; and it’s a plainly inappropriate use of time by government workers.

Somehow, though, Montgomery officials have come to allow the practice in the special case of county firefighters, who fan out at busy intersections for a few days each September for the “Fill the Boot” campaign, a nationwide fundraising project to benefit of people with muscular dystrophy. Here’s an example of officials bending the rules, abandoning common sense and endangering the public — all for an indisputably admirable cause. They shouldn’t.

The County Council now has a chance to rectify the problem by enacting [legislation](#) banning roadside solicitation by on-duty government workers. The measure should be a no-brainer. But owing to heavy lobbying by the firefighters and the Muscular Dystrophy Association, its passage is not assured.

Montgomery has become the focus of a pitched fight over the issue in large part because the campaign has been so successful there. In the past two years, county firefighters have raised almost a half-million dollars for the “Fill the Boot” campaign, more than firefighters have in all but five jurisdictions nationwide. They’re afraid that any other means of raising funds might diminish their take, despite the fact that plenty of other charities manage to raise money successfully without accosting drivers in traffic.

There is simply no reason, in a vast universe of deserving fundraisers and charities, that firefighters and the MDA should enjoy special treatment — especially given the peril the campaign poses to drivers. The firefighters (and even the county fire chief, Richie Bowers) insist they are careful, but their assertions are simply not plausible.

The truth is, it is impossible to fan out at busy suburban intersections without stepping off median strips and into traffic lanes (which is illegal under state law), distracting drivers and posing a nuisance. In the past two years, firefighters soliciting for the “Fill the Boot” campaign have been hit by cars and injured in Texas and California. And drivers have complained about sudden braking as motorists slow down to donate money.

Why wait for someone to get hurt in Montgomery? Why give preferential treatment to this one charitable drive? And how is this a justifiable use of time by government workers?

If firefighters want to raise money for a private charity, let them do so on their own time and without wandering in traffic. Let's hope the County Council has the courage and sense to safeguard the roads for driving, and to remind on-duty firefighters that they should be putting out fires or preparing to do so.