

## Plan Needs Backup

As debate continues, we ought to think about what happens to kids who will be cited for these violations.

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The Montgomery County Council will be holding work sessions in its Public Safety Committee on the new curfew legislation proposed by County Executive Isiah Leggett. This may doom any hopes for speedy action by the council, but it also allows more opportunity to examine the specifics of the legislation and how it fits into the bigger picture.

The proposal itself seems to be gaining support as it moves forward, and will likely see some compromises to address concerns that have been expressed in recent weeks. The curfew would take effect from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. on weeknights and from midnight to five on weekends, and applies to youth 17 and under. Exceptions to the curfew appear to be expanding as residents have weighed in. Youth who are out late and accompanied by a parent or guardian, or returning from concerts or movies will be exempt, as would those who are on errands for their parents, on their way to or from work, or attending religious functions, school dances or sporting events.

To me, that pretty much exhausts all the reasons I can think of for a 17-year-old to be out on the street after 11 p.m. on a school night. The fines initially proposed for parents who allow their kids out late may not make the final cut (which would be too bad in my book), and other tweaks may be made, but let's step back and look at the bigger picture for a moment. What will this curfew accomplish?

The police and most local officials feel it will help improve public safety by adding a new enforcement tool that can be used selectively when existing loitering or disturbing the peace statutes don't readily apply. Curfew laws are actually meant to be selectively enforced, and this has not led to lawsuits or created any significant legal challenges, as Councilmember Phil Andrews and other opponents have suggested. If they had, we would have seen them in Prince George's County and the District of Columbia, which have had curfews in place for some time.

So, from an enforcement standpoint, it seems Police Chief Thomas Manger and other curfew supporters have made a pretty good case for the curfew, but is this enough? We ought to also think about what happens to kids who will be cited for these violations. Where is the action plan for follow-up and intervention by social service agencies and community groups, especially with youth who are found violating the curfew repeatedly?

Since curfew violators often come from homes — of all incomes, by the way — in which parents are either disengaged or, in worst cases, unsafe for kids to be around, this new law will be impacting many truly at-risk youth. The question is, what are we going to do about it? At the same time this curfew proposal is moving forward, many prevention, intervention and anti-gang initiatives are being cut from local social service budgets. Is this wise?

As this debate continues, we ought to be thinking more holistically about prevention and enforcement. One without the other leaves County police out there without the backup they need from our community to truly keep us safe.