

Trouble in MontCo

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It's happening everywhere -- local government trying to rein in the unsustainable pension and health care costs of its public employees. Everywhere includes neighboring Montgomery County, where the effort has resulted in traditional political allies facing off against each other.

According to a Saturday Washington Post story, the Montgomery County Council passed -- unanimously -- a budget last week that includes cuts of \$33 million in health care and retirement benefits for county and school system employees, a small fraction of what the county spends annually on these benefits.

This is a new way of doing business in Montgomery County. As the story put it, "Given the county's history, the survival of the cuts is significant. But the way they were passed shows what happens when a wealthy, liberal county is forced to confront years of political accommodation and generous spending."

This has not been an easy road for the county to go down. County Executive Isiah Leggett says that in proposing his budget he is not bound by the county's collective bargaining process with the Municipal and County Government Employees Organization. He won a court battle that tested that assertion.

Union officials say that they have been befuddled in recent days during a confusing round of bargaining. It seems they were unsure about who was in charge on the other side, the County Council or the county executive.

There is little new here, except that this struggle is not between Democratic public employees and Republican local government. In Montgomery County, Democrats hold every seat on the council and every seat in its local delegation to Annapolis.

It seems that neither the council nor the executive wants to claim ownership of these budget cuts, but both see the necessity of making them. As the Post story put it, county officials "said there was no way to ignore the ballooning costs of benefits, which have more than doubled in a decade."

This unpleasantness next door proves that when push comes to shove, the need to cut runaway costs associated with public employee pensions and health care benefits trumps political affiliation. In Montgomery County, those costs are a reality that simply cannot be ignored even one budget cycle longer.

This may not be over yet in Rockville, as the union vows to challenge the court decision that went in Leggett's favor and has, according to the Post story, "raised the specter of possible strikes."