WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD

Serving the areas of Bethesda, Cabin John, Chevy Chase, Friendship Heights, Garrett Park, Glen Echo, North Bethesda, Potomac, Rockville, and White Flint

May 10, 2012

The Honorable Roger Berliner, President
Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Council President Berliner:

Thank you for this opportunity to present the views of the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board (WMCCAB) regarding Bill 17-12E: Emergency Medical Services – Reimbursement. The WMCCAB met on May 7th, 2012 to discuss Bill 17-12E with Montgomery County Fire Chief Richard Bowers, Assistant Fire Chief Scott Graham, and County Councilmember Phil Andrews – who presented their respective positions concerning the Emergency Medical Services Transport Fee (EMSTF).

After careful discussion, with participation of our guests and audience present, **the members of the WMCCAB voted 7-2 in support of the Bill 17-12E.** One member abstained from the vote.

The members of the WMCCAB understand that the prior EMSTF was struck down by voters via referendum and significant opposition remains. This is something that should not be taken lightly. However, the Board concluded that based on the significant body of evidence stemming from implementation in other jurisdictions, the program will do no harm to County residents. Given this, we can no longer justify forgoing revenue that could actually strengthen our ability to deliver essential services.

The WMCCAB bases its support on the following points:

1. The representatives from Montgomery County Fire & Rescue Service (MCFRS) provided evidence that similar programs have actually not seen a significant reduction in 911 calls in nearby jurisdictions (such as Fairfax) and that virtually all other surrounding jurisdictions have successfully implemented similar, if not identical, programs.

2. The revenue generated by this program would go into the general fund, allowing for restoration of some important services, but more importantly would ease the blow from any negative impacts from State actions. Regardless of the percent of the total budget, $16 million should not be disregarded.

3. MCFRS stated that no resident would be billed for ambulance service, and that the waiver process would be simple for those who make use of it.

WMCCAB members who voted in opposition to Bill 17-12E, oppose the EMSTF based on the following concerns:

1. The voters of Montgomery County rejected the EMSTF by a 20,000 vote margin. Citizens are concerned that elected officials will disregard their choice regarding the EMSTF.

2. The ambulance fee would not resolve the budget issues of the entire County as has been suggested. The $16 million that would be collected from these ambulance fees, less the amount to maintain the program, is one-third of one percent of a $4.5 billion County budget. A Councilmember has suggested that money could be easily found elsewhere in the $4.5 billion budget to replace the $16 million that would have been collected from the ambulance fees.

3. The County approach to billing is different than the model used by surrounding jurisdictions. These jurisdictions do bill residents for ambulance service and have a waiver system that is described as complicated. There is concern that an out-sourced billing operation relying on hospital information may result in improper billing of County residents.

4. All EMSTF revenue should be dedicated solely for fire/rescue and not supplant existing revenue. County taxpayers already pay for ambulance service with the Fire District Tax that funds fire and rescue services.

Should the Council approve Bill 17-12E, all members of the WMCCAB urge the County to undertake a strong, comprehensive outreach campaign to ensure that every County resident understands that they will not be billed for ambulance service. This outreach should be especially geared towards senior citizen and non-native English speaking communities.

Thank you for considering the views of the WMCCAB on this matter.

Sincerely,

Heather Dlhopolsky

Heather Dlhopolsky, Chair

cc: County Executive Isiah Leggett
Montgomery County Council Members
Richard Bowers, Fire Chief