

# Dangerous Fees in Montgomery County

*The Washington Post*

Sunday, October 19, 2008

For the second time in five years, a county executive's proposal to establish ambulance fees is before the Montgomery County Council [editorial, Oct. 8]. If the council approves County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposed bill, parents and friends visiting from out of town, colleagues who work in Montgomery but live elsewhere, and people traveling through the county, who are injured in a crash, would be charged \$300 to \$800 for ambulance service. In addition to violating the Good Samaritan ethic, this would harm the public's safety: Some visiting relatives and nonresident employees who experience mild symptoms of a heart attack or stroke and who know of the ambulance fee would drive themselves to a hospital. Not only would these individuals be at greater risk of permanent harm or death, so would any driver or pedestrian who happened to cross their path.

This concern has been documented. During the Sept. 22 meeting at which the Kensington Town Council voted to oppose ambulance fees, an attendee told the council that a colleague whom he worked with in the District of Columbia and had symptoms of a heart attack (later confirmed) drove himself to a hospital to avoid the District's ambulance fee.

The public understands that ambulance fees are a bad idea. As of mid-October, more than 1,100 people have phoned the council to register their opposition, outnumbering calls from proponents by 19 to 1. The county's Fire and Rescue Commission opposes the bill, as do all 19 volunteer fire departments.

Many volunteers are offended that the county would charge for their services and fear that an ambulance fee would weaken the strong bonds between the local departments and the communities they serve. The volunteer departments own most of the county's fire stations and help maintain them. Volunteer fire and rescue personnel serve shoulder to shoulder with career personnel and volunteered more than a million hours during 2006-07, saving taxpayers tens of millions of dollars.

Some ambulance-fee proponents argue that insurance companies would absorb the \$14 million that the county projects billing them for "covered" ambulance service. When did insurance companies become charitable institutions? Do they really expect us to believe that insurance companies won't raise our rates to protect their bottom line?

In a 2007 survey, 90 percent of Montgomery County residents rated the county's ambulance service as excellent or good. The council would be most unwise to endanger this success by approving ambulance fees.

**-- Phil Andrews**

*Rockville*

*The writer is a member of the Montgomery County Council (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) and chairs its Public Safety Committee.*