



Examiner Local Editorial: Headache over high taxes? Don't call the 'wellness czar'

May 28, 2012 -- 4:42 PM

When Montgomery County Council members passed a budget that includes a \$100,000-a-year "wellness czar" who will encourage employees to stop smoking, eat right, lose weight and exercise, they exposed as a myth the idea that they were forced to raise taxes because the budget had been "cut to the bone." There are no real cuts in the 2013 fiscal year budget, which increases spending six percent over last year.

And Councilmember George Leventhal's assertion that the "entire purpose" of saddling Montgomery County taxpayers with another high-priced employee is to "save taxpayers money" was laugh-out-loud ridiculous. Cato Institute budget analyst Tad DeHaven correctly identified the latest payroll padding as "a waste of taxpayer money."

The "wellness czar" will be joined by a \$160,000-a-year "innovation czar," to figure out how to sell government data to tech-savvy entrepreneurs, and a \$76,000-a-year "patient advocate." The innovation czar will report directly to Chief Administrative Officer Timothy Firestine, the county's highest paid employee who earns more than \$266,000 annually. Firestine was also on the list of county bigwigs discovered to be driving county-paid SUVs last year. His ride cost county taxpayers \$38,116 annually.

Meanwhile, as *The Washington Examiner's* Rachel Baye reported last month, property values in Montgomery County have fallen \$10 billion since fiscal 2011 -- which the council's own staff director said was "unprecedented" in previous recessions. In a rational universe, this enormous loss of equity should have triggered a drop in property taxes, especially after the 4.2-cent rate hike passed last year. No such luck. Council members not only voted to increase property taxes again, they also extended the highly unpopular energy tax and jacked up parking permits and short-term parking rates. They even had the nerve to impose an ambulance fee that had been rejected by voters in a referendum. The county is using this money to hire more people and give current employees a \$2,000 bonus.

A study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin found the cost of living in Montgomery County has increased 50 percent over the past decade. Thanks to the fourth highest state/local tax burden in

the country, the Washington suburb is now more expensive to live in than either high-priced New York City or San Francisco. And when Montgomery taxpayers feel faint when they experience the full brunt of the state and local tax hikes now coming their way, the "wellness czar" won't be much help to them.