



Montgomery County creates \$150k post for bus studies

By: Kate Jacobson – January 27, 2013

Montgomery County is adding a new employee to manage two studies on a proposed rapid bus system -- to the tune of \$150,000 a year.

The County Council has approved the position in the county's Department of Transportation as part of \$500,000 to conduct studies of its proposed bus rapid transit system. Of that \$500,000, about \$50,000 will go to creating a manager position, which will be staffed in March. But once fiscal 2014 starts, the position will make \$150,000 a year including benefits.

Some government officials and residents question the necessity of the position and whether a person who oversees two studies should receive such a big paycheck. Even some on council staff didn't quite see the need -- Deputy Council Staff Director Glenn Orlin recommended against it.

The position was included in County Executive Ike Leggett's original \$1 million request, along with six study areas to look at the installation and operation of the proposed bus rapid transit system. The council approved two studies and the manager position, despite Orlin's recommendation.

"Over the last two years DOT managed the first Countywide Bus Rapid Transit Study (July 2011) and provided support to the [Transit] Task Force's May 2012 study, both without added staff," Orlin wrote.

Those studies found that building a 160-mile BRT network throughout the county would cost \$1.8 billion. Other estimates put it at \$8 billion to \$10 billion, though council members dispute that range.

With virtually no funding for the project, Leggett's Transit Task Force proposed raising property taxes as much as 15 percent.

Orlin said that because the council was adding two studies -- not six -- he didn't see a need to hire another person. He added that the employee who would have supervised the work -- the special assistant to Department of Transportation Director Gary Erenrich -- leads a large number of transit projects.

But council members said the new studies might overwhelm the agency.

Councilwoman Nancy Floreen, D-at large, said she thought adding more to Erenrich's plate would overwhelm him.

"I think the department is way understaffed in terms of how it's managing policy conversations," Floreen said.

Transportation expert Randal O'Toole -- a senior fellow with the libertarian Cato Institute -- said creating study after study is a waste of taxpayer money. Analysis is needed for federal funds, but with a project as big as Montgomery County's aims to be, throwing more money at it won't make it work better or come to fruition faster, he said.

"The taxpayers lose when they hire a firm, the taxpayers lose when they hire people to manage these studies, and the taxpayers lose when the thing itself is built," he said. "They're going to come up with a high-cost plan that really they can't afford."

Some taxpayers question whether two additional studies warrant an entirely new position. Joan Fidler, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League, said it doesn't make sense why county resources weren't rearranged to incur two more studies, especially when adding a new position would come with a \$150,000 price tag.

"It just shows an attitude that's 'let's spend' instead of thinking where can we save," Fidler said.