

Council Panel Supports Funding for Rec Centers Leggett Would Have Delayed Renovations at Three of the Four

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A County Council committee deviated from part of County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposed construction budget by recommending advancing renovation projects of four county recreation centers instead of delaying major renovations at three of the centers as originally proposed. Slated to get the funding under a plan discussed in the council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development committee are four of the county's centers: Scotland, Plum Gar, Good Hope and Ross Boddy Recreation Centers, which are all in historic African-American communities and have not been renovated in several years.

“The bottom line for me and a majority of the council is we made a commitment to these people and we have to honor the commitment, particularly with Scotland,” said Councilman Roger Berliner, whose district includes the Scotland community. “We can’t be like Lucy and Charlie Brown with the football and jerk it away.”

The executive's budget includes \$1.55 million for the renovation of the Plum Gar Recreation Center in Germantown, which will include construction of an addition including an expanded lobby, social hall, kitchen, exercise room and other improvements. Updates for the other four centers are included as part of a \$1.3 million recreation facility modernization fund divided among seven facilities for improvements such as lighting replacements and reconstruction of parking lots.

For the six-year capital budget, which runs from fiscal 2009 (which begins July 1) through fiscal 2014, Leggett (D) recommended the recreation budget at \$50.5 million, a \$3.7 million decrease from the fiscal 2007-2012 budget. The decrease comes from moving some projects out of the six-year period and recommending two projects for only design plans, instead of full completion during this time, Leggett said.

County bonds pay for about 95 percent of recreation department construction projects.

To put the construction projects back on track, Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac recommended a two-tiered approach. According to the plan, the Plum Gar and Scotland centers would received funding for planning and design in fiscal 2009 and 2010. Good Hope and Ross Boddy centers would received planning and design funding in fiscal 2010 and 2011.

The committee recommended, on the advice of Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, looking into using \$5 million intended for construction of a pool in Gaithersburg, that has been held up in negotiations with the city, and use the money to advance Berliner's plan and speed the community center renovation plan.

Tuesday afternoon Berliner was joined at the committee meeting by about **50 members of Action in Montgomery and other nearby residents carrying basketballs, soccer balls and tennis rackets.**

“We need [the improvements] very much because that’s all we have in the community,” said Bette Thompson, a 73-year-old Scotland resident who has visited the community center all her life.

Improvements to several of the county’s community centers —specifically the older ones — has been an ongoing concern in the county. Communities, individually and through AIM congregations, lobbied Leggett for the improvements in the fiscal 2008 budget and last year before submitting his fiscal 2009 budget.

In Scotland’s case, the community center received some funds in the 2008 budget, but not enough for a new center. That center and four others received \$320,000 to split for “furniture and fixtures,” items such as new gym equipment and tables and chairs.

For the Ross Boddy center in Sandy Spring, major renovations, including a gymnasium, are needed there as well.

“I went to the center as a child and the center is the same as it has been for decades, and that’s bad,” said Pearl Selby, who pastors Oak Grove AME Zion Church outside Olney. “The center was an old elementary school and once it became a recreation center it was never adequately renovated for recreation.”

County Recreation Director Gabe Albornoz said the department’s original plans for renovating all four centers was too expensive in a time when the county is facing a deficit.

Plum Gar, became priority because of the few recreation facilities in that area, he said. In the meantime, the county opted for modest improvements until more money became available, Albornoz said. Then add one of the recreation facilities to the budget for full renovations each fiscal year, beginning in fiscal 2010 with the Scotland center, he said.

“Some of these older centers, the question is not if they get done, but when they get done,” said Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park. “For some of us the interest is whether they get done sooner than later.”