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Leggett agrees to support education, affordable housing

Church leaders encouraged, but county exec says funding will be a challenge

by Robert Dongu | Staff Writer

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With a push from area church leaders, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett said last week he would support making a Montgomery College education available to any eligible student as part of next year's budget cycle.

If the County Council agrees, Montgomery would be the first county in the country to do so, according to Action in Montgomery, a nonprofit comprised of county congregational members.

Leggett's recommended budget, released Monday, includes a community college tuition increase that would raise tuition \$3 per credit hour for county residents, \$6 for Maryland residents and \$9 for out-of-state students.

AIM officials said rising tuition shows the need to make two-year college available for all students.

"College should not be tied to the market," said AIM spokeswoman Alisa Glassman, who said the money could be raised from the county and corporate sponsors.

Elizabeth Homan, a spokeswoman for Montgomery College, said the college's Board of Trustees recommended the increase to Leggett as a way to respond to the school's rising enrollment. Homan said the college has received more money for financial aid to help cover the tuition increase.

"It's an effort to assist some students," she said.

At an AIM meeting March 10 at the Church of the Resurrection in Burtonsville, Leggett (D) agreed to back the college program and said he would propose to add \$19 million for the county's Housing Initiative Fund. The \$19 million, which would come from the

county general fund, was included in Leggett's proposed \$58 million for the initiative, said Mary Anderson, a county spokeswoman. The total from the general fund last year was about \$9 million to 10 million, she said.

Leggett told AIM it would be a challenge to get the council's support for spending increases during an economic downturn.

"Philosophically, emotionally and spiritually, I agree with all [of AIM's requests]," Leggett said. "But it's not simply if Ike Leggett agrees with all those things; it is important that the entire county government is in support of those things."

Leggett told AIM his proposal to the housing fund would be "a huge increase."

"There will be a very strong effort, in my opinion, to reduce that [the fund's] number, to not make certain that we have the resources to move forward," he said. "Be prepared to move forward and to fight, and to fight hard, that the revenues remain in the budget."

Before Leggett spoke, Department of Recreation Director Gabriel Albernoz said renovations remain on schedule for Good Hope, Plum Gar, Ross Boddy and Scotland community centers. AIM has supported renovating the centers.

"The money is safe. ... We're moving full-speed ahead," Albernoz said.

Winston Churchill High School student Mohammad Abbas helped push the county to renovate the Scotland Community Center in Potomac. At a "house meeting" during the AIM event, he said he uses the community center all the time but also wants other opportunities.

"I like school, and I study hard," said Abbas, a junior. "I'm doing my part as a student, but I'm worried about my future. ... I want to go to college."

The meeting moderator asked Abbas if he's willing to do something about it. "That's why I'm here," Abbas responded.

His mother, Amal Abbas, is barely able to make ends meet working full time at Macy's at Montgomery Mall. Her husband died three years ago.

"My big problem is I don't know how I will afford to send my three children to college," she said. "Education is No. 1. If my children have a good education, it will save their lives in the future."

The Abbas' story is not uncommon for the Rev. Jacqueline Jones-Smith of Good Hope Union United Methodist Church in Silver Spring. Jones-Smith's church is a part of AIM.

"We have a number of young people that are concerned about [affording college]," Jones-Smith said Friday.

While donations at Good Hope Union are steady, Jones-Smith and her members are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. Younger retirees are coming back to work to supplement their income, she said. And some members are being forced to put off graduate school.

Since the church has numerous volunteers, Jones-Smith said she has avoided some of the financial struggles of larger churches that employ more people.

"So far, we haven't had to cut back in terms of our Sunday school and Bible study," she said.