

washingtonpost.com

Officials Urge Annapolis to Fund Building, Compensation Programs

By Nick Anderson
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, January 12, 2006; T08

With elections nearing and Maryland's treasury in surplus, Prince George's officials are seeking to parlay the county's political influence into more state dollars for transit, public safety, community development and, especially, schools.

County Executive *Jack B. Johnson* (D) drove the point home Monday, noting that political roads these days often lead to the vote-rich county. "We just want everyone to know that all financial roads start in Prince George's County," Johnson said.

Johnson spelled out the county's legislative agenda in a gathering of elected officials at James Madison Middle School in Upper Marlboro. The General Assembly session was to begin yesterday in Annapolis.

The county is seeking nearly \$120 million to build and renovate schools, plus \$39 million in reimbursement for already-completed projects for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Last year, the state awarded the county about \$30 million for school construction. Last week, Gov. *Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.* (R) proposed \$281 million for building projects in the 2006-07 fiscal year in 24 school systems statewide.

In addition, the county hopes to persuade the state government to fund a provision of the 2002 Bridge to Excellence Act for the first time that would compensate Prince George's and other large school systems for the higher cost of living in cities and big suburbs. The act is commonly known as the Thornton funding initiative, named after former Prince George's school board chairman *Alvin Thornton*, and the provision at issue is the geographic cost of education index.

So far in his term, Ehrlich has funded most of the Thornton plan but not the geographic index. The extra funding for the provision, county school officials estimate, would be about \$14.1 million in the 2006-07 school year.

Johnson said the county also is seeking \$8 million for development geared toward mass transit; \$5.6 million for bus service; \$16 million for various projects in Suitland, Oxon Hill and Langley Park; aid for police to compensate for "spillover" crime from the District; and financial incentives for apartment owners to tighten security in high-crime areas.

Additionally, Johnson said he wants to amend state law to require that juveniles age 16 and 17 charged with vehicle theft should be tried as adults.

The first-term county executive, who plans to seek reelection this year, surrounded himself with an array of state lawmakers, County Council members and others. Among them was the chairman of the state Senate

Budget and Taxation Committee.

"We'll bring the bread back home," state Sen. *Ulysses Currie* (D-Prince George's) said.

Johnson stumbled a bit as he introduced U.S. Rep. *Chris Van Hollen* (D-Md.), who represents a slice of northern Prince George's.

"We're also happy to have Councilman Van Hollen here," Johnson said, drawing titters from the crowd before correcting himself. "Congressman Van Hollen," Johnson said. "I knew it started with a 'C.' "

Money for Libraries

County Council Chairman *Thomas E. Dernoga* (D-Laurel) added a quick plug for one of his priorities: money to improve school libraries. Monday's announcement took place in the library of James Madison Middle, or to use an updated term, the media center. "This is nice," Dernoga said, looking around, "but it could be so much better."

Asked how he would improve the center, school Principal *Mark King* said he would double the number of computers. There are now 10.

Alliance Calls for Growth

In another legislative wish list released this week, the *Prince George's Business-Education Alliance* echoed much of the county agenda and added these priorities: more funding for teacher pensions, community colleges and programs to improve student performance on the Maryland School Assessments.

Late Audit Stymies Funds

The clock is running in overtime for the county school system to submit its annual financial audit for the fiscal year that ended June 30. The audit was due Sept. 30. The state has begun freezing county aid as a result. So far, officials say about \$11 million has been withheld.

A late audit last year caused financial and public-relations headaches for the school system. Officials said the audit will be ready any week now. But school board member *Robert O. Duncan* (Laurel), chairman of a committee that oversees school finances, confessed frustration.

"I'm very disheartened," Duncan said. "I really am anxious to see us try to get the school system's operational management in general, and in particular, its financial management, back on the horse it was on 10, 15 years ago, when you could take all this stuff for granted. Other school systems in the state are able to get this done. There's no reason we shouldn't either."

© 2006 The Washington Post Company