

Should Baltimore County police, firefighters and other public safety workers get a property tax break?



Baltimore County Councilman Wade Kach is proposing a property tax credit for several categories of public safety employees who live in the county. (Jen Rynda / Baltimore Sun Media Group)



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Public safety employees and volunteer firefighters in Baltimore County would get annual property tax credits under a proposal being considered by the County Council.

A bill introduced this week by Republican Wade Kach of Cockeysville would apply to police officers, emergency medical technicians, sheriff's deputies, correctional officers and both professional and volunteer firefighters who live in the county.

They would get up to a \$1,500 discount next year on property taxes, up to \$2,000 in 2020 and up to \$2,500 in 2021.

Kach said the county should pass the legislation to stay competitive with others in the Baltimore area.

In 2017, state lawmakers passed a bill to allow local governments to offer the credits, and jurisdictions including Baltimore City and Anne Arundel County have done so.

“We have an excellent police force [and] fire department,” Kach said. “Our volunteers do a tremendous service for our communities ...I don’t want to see Baltimore County fall behind and not be competitive with our neighbors in continuing to attract the best first responders.”

Kach also pointed to problems the county has had retaining correctional officers. The county detention center has been racking up overtime and training costs due to job vacancies.

The county auditor’s office has not yet released an estimate of how much Kach’s proposal would cost, but several Democrats on the council have already expressed concern about the potential price tag.

“My initial concerns are, how do we afford these things in a year where our budget is very tight?” said Councilman Tom Quirk, a Catonsville Democrat. “It’s something we’ll have to look at and discuss ... We haven’t seen the final numbers from the auditor’s office, but I think the price tag will fairly significant.”

Council Chairman Julian Jones, a Woodstock Democrat, said he also needs to see estimates on the budget impact before taking a position on the bill.

“In general, I’m very supportive of the public safety community,” said Jones, a retired Anne Arundel County firefighter. But Jones said he believes that when one group receives a tax break, it ends up “disproportionately taxing everybody else.”

Councilwoman Vicki Almond, a Reisterstown Democrat who is running for county executive, said she does not support the bill in its current form, calling it “a little bit broad.”

Republican Councilman David Marks of Perry Hall said he supports the bill, and hopes the council can come to a “strong bipartisan consensus” on the proposal. He said he believes it’s a good thing for police officers to live in local neighborhoods.

“Many of our police officers live in Carroll and Harford counties and Pennsylvania,” Marks said. “I do think when a police officer is a resident of the neighborhood, it improves public safety.”

John Ripley, president of the Baltimore County Federation of Public Employees, called the proposed tax credits “well deserved.” The union’s members include correctional officers.

“Of course we should want our local public safety employees shopping at our grocery stores, worshiping in local churches, going to the local movies, and volunteering in our community recreation programs,” Ripley said in a statement. “Having public safety employees live in the jurisdiction that [they] serve, can only make Baltimore County a safer place.”

Kach said the county can afford the tax credits.

“We’d be in far better shape if the council hadn’t passed that \$43 million corporate bailout for Towson Row,” Kach said, referring to a package that County Executive Kevin Kamenetz requested for the developers of the downtown Towson project. “It’s matter of priorities.”

The council approved the assistance for Towson Row long party lines in December, with the council’s three Republicans opposing it and the four Democrats voting for it.

Kamenetz, a Democrat, won’t weigh in on Kach’s proposal until the council takes final action on it, spokeswoman Ellen Kobler said.

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