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## Editorials

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Updated Mar. 10, 2005

### The divide over the City of Frederick's budget

The City of Frederick is facing a financial crisis, and we have little faith in the ability of our elected officials to work together to solve it.

The divide between Mayor Jennifer P. Dougherty (D) and the majority of the Board of Aldermen has been growing for two years, and every time we believe it could grow no wider, it finds a way.

Just as water takes the path of least resistance, it seems our elected officials take the path of greatest resistance, all while creating a divide that makes the Grand Canyon look like a crack in the sidewalk.

This week the divide widened with the presentation of the proposed \$58.4 million budget for fiscal 2006, which begins July 1. The details are still emerging -- the budget only became public at the workshop Wednesday afternoon -- but we caught a glimpse of the battles ahead when the mayor informed nearly a dozen employees on Friday that their jobs are not included in the budget.

Such news should not surprise anyone. The mayor has been warning about potential layoffs since shortly after the three Republican aldermen voted last fall to lessen the amount of

property taxes the city will collect using the state's Homestead Property Tax Credit.

But the reality of the pending layoffs hit City Hall hard Friday, and the reverberations have been felt all week. If the aldermen don't restore those jobs during the budget process, those employees will be out of work come the first day of the new fiscal year, July 1.

Layoffs are a delicate matter. They can be an acceptable way to deal with budget problems, but one must not forget the human toll involved. There are faces and families behind the numbers.

The mayor says the aldermen acted irresponsibly when they essentially lowered property taxes last fall, and that she is being responsible in drafting a budget that does not exceed the revenue the city expects to bring in next year. While we believe expenses should be lower than revenues (or at the most match them), we question these layoffs, especially given the fact that two of them are mandated in the city's charter: the directors of human resources and recreation.

How can the mayor propose cutting jobs that the charter calls for? Does not her job call for upholding the charter? Equally as important, how can any organization with 500-plus employees manage without a director of human resources?

The mayor's answer is that there is no money in the budget for the directors, and that others will handle their duties. She says there is nothing in the charter that prohibits her from suspending the positions for a year or so.

We don't buy that explanation. The charter is an enabling document that spells out how a government will work. It does not have a caveat that reads, "These jobs are nice if we can afford them, but if not, just have others do the work."

The charter reads that there "shall be" a director of human resources and recreation. We see no interpretation in these two words.

Some even question the reason behind the mayor informing the employees of the possible layoffs, saying there is no reason to worry anyone about the security of their job until the aldermen finalize the budget.

We disagree. We believe it is better to hear bad news directly, as opposed to reading or hearing about it in the news.

But we have one thought we can't quite process: If the mayor thought the aldermen were being so irresponsible when they limited further the amount of property taxes the city could collect, why did she not veto it? Would that not have been in the city's financial interest?

This year is shaping up to be a watershed year for the city, and the election will be the turning point. Voters will be certain to

remember the budget battles of the spring when they cast their ballots this fall.

Let's hope they vote for people who will find a way to build a bridge over our own Grand Canyon.

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▼ **Montgomery** Editorials

Updated Mar. 10, 2005

### **Inexcusable attitudes toward school bus assault**

Each day, more than 96,000 students enrolled in Montgomery County schools climb aboard a yellow bus for the trip between school and home, or to shuttle between other schools.

By most standards, the performance and safety record is impeccable.

That's why a sexual assault aboard a bus ferrying middle school students last month is troubling. And the way the school administrators and police responded is almost unfathomable.

Based on interviews with parents, school officials and police, here's what happened:

A day after Valentine's Day, two boys groped a 12-year-old girl on the ride to Roberto Clemente Middle School. A third boy blocked the girl's path as she tried to exit when the bus arrived at the Germantown school.

The girl told a school counselor, who alerted administrators, according to an account provided by parents.

The school system confirms an "inappropriate touching incident" and a spokesman said two boys were suspended for five days. Beyond that, the school system won't say much, citing student confidentiality regulations. Criminal charges against juveniles are protected, as well, unless they are charged as adults with serious crimes.

The victim requested a transfer to another school, a mid-year move that has great potential to disrupt her coursework, friendships and basic routine.

Now comes the part that is so hard to understand.

After the "inappropriate touching," the girl's parents said the only contact they had from school administrators was a voice-mail message on a cellphone. The school system says it tried, several times, to contact the parents without success.

And what happened when the parents went to file a complaint with the police several days later?

At the Germantown district station, they say officers would not take

a report, exacerbating the frustration they felt with the entire episode.

Since the initial story, first reported by The Gazette's Jackie Mah, three other parents have stepped forward with similar concerns over bus assaults and an apparent lethargy on the part of administrators in investigating and reporting these cases.

One mother, attempting to find out about an episode in which her 11-year-old said she was forced to perform a sex act on a bus, said she encountered "just one excuse after the other ... And bottom line, it was said that it was my little girl's fault."

Here's another chilling quote from one school-based officer: "There are a lot of victims who don't report stuff," she said. "It's hard to say how much stuff goes on if the victims are not reporting stuff."

After seeing how the system responded in these rare cases, it is understandable that some children and families refrain from complaining.

Although it is difficult to track how often there are assaults of any kind, in buses or on school grounds, we believe that, thankfully, they are limited. Students shouldn't have to worry about being groped, taunted or clobbered by bullies.

The Web site of one Silver Spring school points out that "Discipline problems that occur on the bus are dealt with severely because of the safety hazards involved." That should be true, but the message apparently didn't make it to the Germantown school's administrators.

Assault is never OK. To have school administrators deal with the Germantown assault with a routine, "these things will happen" attitude is inexcusable.

In the case of the Germantown girl, there appears to be plenty of blame to go around. Not only was she assaulted, she is being forced to upend her routine and transfer to a different school, while her attackers are suspended for a week.

Could the bus driver have intervened? Is a voice-mail an adequate way to inform parents that something has happened to their child? Did the police turn a deaf ear because of procedure?

Pointing fingers won't solve what might be a deeper, institutional problem. The school system's leaders must reinforce with all employees -- from bus drivers to classroom teachers -- that there is zero tolerance for assault and that they have a responsibility to make a timely report to parents with all the facts.

Mehron Price's parents couldn't have been any prouder Friday night. Their 13-year-old daughter had just won the county spelling bee title for the second year in a row, and she made it look simple.

Her parents spoke of playing the word game Scrabble at home and how Mehron often would correct their pronunciation of words as she prepared for the competition.

"I guess we'll put this one with the other one," her father said holding up the large dictionary she won again this year to prepare for the upcoming 78th Annual Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, where Mehron will represent the county.

Mehron's parents are doing what county officials have been stressing in Prince George's for quite some time ~ staying involved in education.

Currently, there is low or nonexistent participation at many parent-teacher organizations, volunteers for educational events can be hard to come by, and, in some cases, students just aren't receiving the support they need at home.

Mehron and her family are an example of the good that can come out of staying active in a child's education. And they weren't alone.

Principals, teachers, parents and siblings packed the theater at Prince George's Community College to cheer on the 26 competitors, and, afterward, fellow students stormed the stage to hug finalists.

Spelling bee participants weren't the only ones basking in community support. Only a few days after the bee, 46 members of the Prince George's County Boys and Girls Club were honored for their athletic and academic achievements.

County Executive Jack B. Johnson ~ a former coach for the Kettering Boys and Girls Club ~ presented the club with a check for \$33,000 at the event. He pointed out that his three children had participated in the club's activities.

"Those were good years," Johnson said. "We are proud of all the children that played together, worked together, win together and cried together. But at the end of the day, they have learned to play together to be useful citizens of our county."

It's no secret. Parental and community involvement in our schools and childrens' lives will result in a county full of achievers.

Unfortunately, for years, school system woes have overshadowed the students' issues. First, there was the battle between the former school board and then-superintendent Iris Metts, and now there are the allegations that schools CEO Andre Hornsby has committed ethical violations in his dealings with educational software vendors.

These problems have caused some parents to give up on county schools, leaving residents with the feeling that without strong leadership, our schools are doomed to fail.

What we need to realize, however, is that even as the investigations and politics continue, so does the school day ~ teachers are still teaching, and students are still learning.

Certainly, it is a shame that any official's energy or school money is spent on anything other than improving education for our children, but giving up on the school system is not an option.

Become involved in local schools ~ even if you don't have a child in the school system ~ and stay on top of school issues. Visit the school system's Web site at [www.pgcps.org/](http://www.pgcps.org/) to get details on public hearings and meetings.

Finally, spend time with your children. As Mehron Price demonstrated, even an occasional board game can make a difference.

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▼ **Carroll Editorials**

Updated Mar. 10, 2005

### **Districting committee on right track**

The committee that will propose the new districts for five Carroll County commissioners met last Wednesday night and what was interesting was the way in which all seven worked well together.

We were not sure what to expect, three Republicans, three Democrats and Election Board Chief Janet Jump refereeing. Would this be another example of partisan, no compromise politics? No, far from it. The six partisan men (Jump is the only woman, which is a whole other story) discussed the issues and came to consensus on how they would proceed.

Whether this amicability will continue through the entire course of their mission remains to be seen but Wednesday night was an excellent start.

The committee was given a brief outline of the criteria they would need to use in deciding the districts by assistant attorney general for the state Robert Zarnock. He told them that equal population was the main criteria and that the population of the districts should not vary by more than 10 percent if they wanted to avoid court cases (using the 2000 census, which puts Carroll County's population at about 150,000, each district would be about 30,000.)

A couple of the members looked at the map of Carroll County which had the election districts delineated and offered that producing a map with five fairly equal districts would be a simple task. Committee member Maurice Wheatley already had his map done and the districts colored in. And most folks looking at the map on the wall would tend to agree that dividing the county into five districts would not be difficult.

However, since we are a litigious society, there was concern among most of the committee members that outlining specific criteria, getting public input as well as information from other counties of

similar size that had gone through the same process, and then holding public hearings, was a way to hopefully keep any lawsuits over the final map at bay.

Whether that will work or not remains to be seen. But while producing the map could probably be done in another couple meetings, the districting committee will meet a number of times in order to try to satisfy everyone.

The committee will also be soliciting community comments at every meeting so the public not only will be able to hear what the members are discussing but will be able to react. The districting committee is off to a really good start and after the first meeting there is no reason to doubt it will continue on that same course.

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