

Put the Public Ahead of Politics

An Open Government Demands Prior Notice of Budget Cuts

A change in an important aspect of Maryland's annual state budget development would help the governor and legislature work more collaboratively, promote greater citizen involvement and increase accountability – all of which would strengthen the state's finances and the democratic process.

At issue is the procedure under which the state Board of Public Works (BPW) introduces budget cuts. The way it works now, legislators and the public often don't get the time needed to fully scrutinize and evaluate the impact of reductions in state spending that the BPW proposes. The BPW is a three-member body consisting of the Governor, Comptroller, and Treasurer that oversees many aspects of the state's finances.

In Maryland, the BPW is able to make significant budget cuts that affect state services, employment, and the economy with little review by legislators or the public. Normally, the board can cut individual budget items by up to 25 percent without any prior notice.

Thanks to language included in the legislation enacting this year's budget, the Board had to provide at least 72 hours' notice before cutting the budget that the legislature and governor approved in June for the fiscal year that began July 1. But that requirement will be eliminated in the future unless the legislature acts.

Returning to the no-notice approach would make it even harder for citizens to engage in the decision-making process. Even with advance notice, the three members of the Board of Public Works have an outsized influence on Maryland's public finances and policy decisions.

Requiring the BPW to submit proposed budget cuts to the General Assembly before the board votes on them would give the public and legislators a more adequate time period to respond to the proposal. This tested approach will help make sure the board fully understands how the proposal will affect the services citizens rely on.

Extending the notification requirement to 10 days and making it permanent, which requires a legislative vote, would be a big step in the right direction. The best policy would be to require the notification, and to require the Board of Public Works to post the following information on its website:

- 1) The amount of the proposed reduction in both dollars and percentage values;
- 2) The fund source of the budget item that is subject to the proposed reduction;
- 3) A brief narrative summary of how the proposed reduction would affect the program the appropriation supports;
- 4) Any projected reductions in workforce as a result of the proposed reduction; and
- 5) Any recommendations with regard to the proposed reduction.