

# Woodsboro Walkersville Times

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## **“A Balancing Act for the Future”**

By Justin M. Kiska

I was happy to see some of the recent charter amendments that were proposed by members of the County Council, one in particular. Since the charter went into effect, I have been a strong proponent of giving the Council the ability to increase, not simply decrease, spending on budget items.

Under the charter as it is currently written, the county executive is responsible for putting the budget together. The executive gets to decide how much and where county dollars will be spent. That's one of the main reasons they are elected after all and that's the way it is done by counties throughout Maryland operating under the charter form of government.

What, then, is the role of the County Council in the process beyond approving the budget?

The Council can make cuts to the proposed budget and decrease spending. However, the Council does not have the ability to increase funding for any budget item.

During the previous budget cycle, the newly sworn-in Council exercised its budget authority and made over \$600,000 in cuts to County Executive Jan Gardner's first budget. While members of the Council would have liked to have seen that additional money go toward certain programs, they could not make that happen because the County Council can only decrease the amount of money spent on a budget item.

In 2014, I proposed what I thought should be the first amendment to the charter. The County Council should be given the authority to not only decrease funding for particular line items but increase it as well. Only as long as they were able to find the money in other areas to keep the budget balanced though.

On principle, I do not like giving more people the power to spend county tax dollars, but if the Council is to be the legislative balance to the executive, they need the ability to fulfill that responsibility.

That's why I was very disappointed to see that one of Councilman Tony Chmelik's amendments to do just that, allow the council to increase spending when it saw fit, failed.

In an ideal world, the county executive and council would work together in drafting a budget so that everyone was happy with the very first draft. Unfortunately, that isn't how things actually happen and a despotic county executive could very easily ride roughshod over the Council throughout the budget process.

Under Frederick County's charter, we have a very powerful county executive. That's why it's so important that the County Council be able to provide a balance to the executive's authority. To do that, however, they need the tools. An amendment to the charter allowing them to increase funding is the first step.

To provide the balance on the other side, the county executive should be able to veto the budget if the Council has gotten out of hand with its changes.

As I have talked about these changes, people have argued they don't want this particular County Council or Executive to have more power, but I remind them there are going to be elections and we have

no idea who will end up in Winchester Hall in the future. Putting these changes in place now will safeguard that future.

If our federal and state governments are set up to have these types of budgetary checks and balances, why shouldn't our county government? I would encourage the Council to reconsider the amendment and pass it on to the voters for the final say.