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EDITORIALS

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Unshackling Montgomery's police

County voters have a chance to end union interference.

MOST UNIFORMED POLICE forces function with a clear chain of command. Montgomery County's police department functions more like a new-age collective, where management's most workaday directives can be challenged by the police union, endlessly debated and negotiated into oblivion.

That arrangement has given rise to such abuse — notoriously, the union disputed and delayed even departmental rules requiring that officers read their e-mail — that politicians finally intervened. Last year, the all-Democratic County Council, traditionally pro-union, voted unanimously to scrap the 30-year-old law empowering the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) to negotiate over the effects of practically any management decision.

The FOP, determined to preserve the status quo, is pushing back. It has forced the issue onto the county ballot this fall and is lobbying Democratic officials to urge voters to overturn the council's sensible law. It is vital that the law be upheld to ensure Montgomery's police force is professionally managed. Voters should mark "yes" on Question B.

The FOP has launched an expensive and misleading public relations campaign, alleging that the law would roll back collective-bargaining rights for the police. This is false. Like every other union that represents public employees in Montgomery County, including firefighters and general government workers, the FOP would continue to negotiate salary, benefits and basic working conditions such as hours and holidays.

What would be eliminated is an additional power, known as "effects bargaining," that gives the union practically unlimited power to substitute its druthers for management's prerogatives. No other police force in Maryland has such arrangement, and for good reason: It makes the force all but ungovernable.

The FOP delayed for years the installation of cameras in police cruisers, insisting that the department be barred from using footage to hold police officers accountable for their actions in most situations. The union has objected to and forced changes in the deployment of basic equipment such as electronic

ticketing device and semi-automatic weapons, insisting they be distributed according to seniority rather than operational need. Amazingly, it tried to obstruct efforts to beef up patrols in Silver Spring last year to address a spike in crime; that move, to the FOP, was a "prohibited practice" subject to negotiation. (Some officers simply ignored the union and volunteered for the temporary assignment anyway.)

The FOP has even challenged the introduction of new technology intended to ensure officers' security. A case in point: It insisted on assurances that tracking devices to monitor the location of police cruisers could not be used in disciplinary proceedings.

Police chiefs elsewhere react with stunned amazement when they learn of the rules under which the department functions, or doesn't, in Montgomery. The effect of those rules is to handcuff management, subjecting basic directives to protracted bargaining. County voters have a chance to end these abuses, and they should.

Vote FOR Question B

It Just Makes Sense



Montgomery County Office of Public Information