

Investigative Voice Common Sense Award - Councilman William Cole

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Take care of the little things, and the big things will take care of themselves. It's an oft quoted axiom that gets bandied about but rarely put into practice inside the halls of government.

It took months, for example, to get City Hall to slash the number of entrees offered at Mayor Sheila Dixon's month City Council luncheon from three to a paltry two. Despite the longest recession since World War II, making the symbolic cut rarely seems to find a receptive audience in an era when bankrupt bankers treat themselves to taxpayer-funded bonuses while the rolls of the unemployed swell.

That's why first term City Councilman William Cole deserves recognition for his efforts to tackle an issue with arguably more symbolic significance than fiscal impact: the city's penchant for allowing city employees to drive city-owned vehicles hundreds of miles outside Baltimore's environs with taxpayer-funded gas.

With the diligence and foresight that seems inherently lacking within the city's moribund legislative body, Cole has pressed the administration of Mayor Sheila Dixon to come clean about how many thousands of dollars it costs the taxpayers to provide curbside to road service for a select cadre of city employees.

He has forced the city to divulge who drives where, how many miles they rack up on the taxpayers' dime, and where these cars are parked at night.

The tab, of course, is still being added up. Right we know it costs taxpayers more than \$300,000 annually in gas costs to run these Dodge Rams to assorted burbs in Pennsylvania. City officials still haven't provided details on maintenance, accidents, and better yet, depreciation -- expenses that could bring the final tally of providing this overuse perk to several million dollars.

So what's the big deal? Even a million dollars is pocket change for a city facing the prospect of forking over more than \$100 million to keep the Fire and Police pension fund solvent.

True enough. But what Cole's efforts have revealed is an institutional malaise more significant than another case of profligate government spending. He has cast a light on the disconnect between the people who benefit from the city's largess, and those who pay for it, raising uncomfortable questions like why a city that's structurally broke affords its employees the most generous benefits in the state.

For example, Cole is now coming up with "best practices" by requesting take-home car

policies for surrounding jurisdictions. Among his preliminary findings are the much wealthier jurisdictions are far stingier with take-home cars than Baltimore City, Cole says. Harford County for example, charges employees 62 cents for each mile notched outside the county in a take-home car. Howard County too, has similar restrictions.

And Cole has not raised a stink merely for 15 minutes of media attention. He has gone a step further, meeting with the mayor to propose changes that would bring the take-home car policy in line with other jurisdictions, a good idea for a city that soon will be forced to lay-off employees and cut back on city services to balance the budget

Perhaps Cole's example will provide motivation for his colleagues who seem all too happy to put their stamp of approval on a generous double-dipping arrangement for retired employees, for example, a practice that cost the city \$4 million last year on top of generous pension payments.

Still, Cole probably said it best himself last week in our article that recounted the city's reluctance to turn over accident reports involving take-home cars. "I pay high property taxes and I struggle to live in Baltimore just like everyone else," he said. "I want to know my tax dollars are being spent prudently."

Amen. That's why William Cole is our most recent Common Sense Award winner.