

Sheriff's plan on tax refunds OK'd

Bateman says withholding money from criminals will help him cut backlog of arrest warrants

BY YVONNE WENGER
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Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ronald S. Bateman says he has a plan for an innovative crime tool that plays on criminals' greed by making them turn themselves in before they can collect tax refunds.

At Bateman's urging, the General Assembly signed off on a bill —awaiting Gov. Martin O'Malley's signature — that will allow the state to withhold refunds for people with outstanding arrest warrants in the county. Bateman says he hasn't seen such a program anywhere else.

"I came up with the idea because I know greed is a close first or second to the root of all crimes," Bateman said.

The sheriff believes that accessing the refund checks will entice those who have ignored their arrest warrants to turn themselves in to authorities. That would free up his deputies to pursue other matters, Bateman said.

The one-year pilot program is intended to help the county cut down on its 8,000 outstanding arrest warrants, of which 87 percent are for misdemeanor offenses, such as probation violations and failure to appear in court, Bateman said. The costs to implement are nominal, he said.

The matter is one of several that kept county officials' attention during the legislative session that ended Monday.

Sen. James E. DeGrange Sr., an Anne Arundel County Democrat, said that after a

one-year test run, the state can gauge the program's success and decide whether to duplicate it in other counties.

"If it works as well as we all hope, it could be a statewide initiative," DeGrange said.

Bateman said he thinks the legislation has a chance to be a model for the nation. He already received a call from a sheriff in Nebraska who is interested in developing a program there.

The state would not take any of the money but keep the check in its possession until the person responded to the arrest warrant.

The state's comptroller will intercept the refund checks and letters will be issued to individuals with outstanding criminal warrants in Anne Arundel County instead.

Based on an informal survey of 50 people arrested in the county that the sheriff's office conducted recently, 40 percent were owed tax refunds, Bateman said.

The pilot program excludes warrants for juveniles and members of the armed forces, Bateman said. It does not apply to warrants issued for civil charges or back child support.

Bateman said he expects to have the program in effect by October.

The legislature also passed a bill that allows the county to lower the qualifying age from 65 to 62 for Anne Arundel residents to participate in a property tax deferral program. The program, which has about 50 participants, allows individuals to See **REFUNDS**, page 4

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put off tax increases and pay the difference when they sell their house or have their estate settle it when they die.

County Executive John R. Leopold said he intends to introduce local legislation to enact the change.

DeGrange, a member of the Senate's Budget and Taxation Committee, said the county will see some spending perks. For example, the legislature approved \$600,000 toward the redevelopment of a new facility for Hospice of the Chesapeake.

George said the county delegation was also able to award a \$325,000 matching grant for the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County in Arnold.

Molly Knipe, executive director of the local YWCA, said the money will be used to bolster the nonprofit's work with domestic violence and sexual assault victims. The money will be used toward the extensive renovation of the Ritchie Highway facility, she said.

"We are incredibly appreciative; we're just thrilled," Knipe said.

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