

## The Washington Post

### Democrats Commit To Activist Agenda; Montgomery Leaders Turn to a Plan B; [FINAL Edition]

Tim Craig. The Washington Post. Washington, D.C.: Dec 12, 2004. pg. C.06

Full Text (816 words)

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Montgomery County Council President Tom Perez, like many self-described liberal Democrats, said he woke up Nov. 3 to the frightening realization that Republicans were in charge of the federal government for another four years.

As he headed back to Maryland after a week mobilizing Latino voters in Pennsylvania, Perez decided his council seat gave him a platform to push his brand of politics.

"There has never been a more important time to be in local government," said Perez, who represents Silver Spring. "Because of gridlock on Capitol Hill and Annapolis, we are going to take the bull by the horn and we are going to be innovative because I believe in progressive government. . . . We are going to push the envelope."

Perez, elected council president by his colleagues last week, is not alone in seeing Montgomery County as a foil to the Republican policies of President Bush and Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

With Democrats holding eight of nine council seats and a Democratic county executive burnishing his credentials as he prepares to run for governor, county leaders say they are ready to use the county as an incubator for progressive policies.

"For those of us who have the values that we have, there is a great desire to show what government can do," said council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), the council's vice president. "This is an activist council."

But some county leaders -- Democratic and Republican -- say this activism springs as much from political ambition as from altruism. Others worry that the accumulated costs of big-government programs could leave the county with a big bill to pay.

"I am concerned the county is getting spread too thin," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg). "We need to make some hard choices. . . . We need to keep the tax burden reasonable."

The council's agenda over the next year will build on the county's reputation for taking on the kind of issues many local leaders leave to the state and federal governments. The initiatives could include tackling the problems of predatory lending, addressing federal cutbacks in Section 8 subsidized housing vouchers and exploring ways to promote clean energy and the construction of environmentally sensitive buildings.

This follows a year in which the council was the first in the nation to approve standards for cable modem service, agreed to provide all residents with discount pharmacy cards and defied federal authorities with a resolution encouraging county employees to obtain cheaper prescription drugs from Canada.

Last week, Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) announced plans to spend \$20 million by 2010 to make sure 40,000 uninsured residents -- about half of the county's uninsured population -- have free access to a network of nonprofit health clinics. And he wants to expand a program that matches day laborers, including illegal immigrants, with employers.

"Those of us who are Democrats were hopeful for a Kerry administration," said council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), referring to presidential candidate John F. Kerry. "Well, there isn't going to be a Kerry administration, so what is our choice? Do we wait another four years to see if there is going to be a Democrat in

the White House, or do we act locally?

"The answer is, we act locally."

Beyond the claims of compassion, politics is also at play in the policies coming out of Rockville. Duncan, who spent much of his tenure as county executive governing as a pro-business Democrat, has been polishing his liberal credentials as he considers entering the party's 2006 primary for governor.

Perez, who is considering a bid for state attorney general, is trying to solidify his record as a consumer advocate. And Silverman, who has been closely aligned with business interests, has been buttressing his ties to less conservative constituencies as he mulls running for county executive.

"The political overlay presents wonderful opportunities for progressives," Perez said.

Ed Kilgore, a policy director at the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, said an unsympathetic national political environment is forcing local leaders to explore their own solutions to many problems.

"I think they feel a sense that they are on their own," Kilgore said. "If you are in a position like Montgomery, where you've got some resources, talent and political capital, you ought to try some things out."

Even though Montgomery residents' support for Democratic policies appears to be strong -- Kerry bested President Bush by 137,000 votes in the county -- Republicans say Duncan's statewide ambitions could hinge on keeping the County Council in check.

"This council's liberal, progressive agenda is not going to sell statewide, and Doug Duncan knows it," said Maryland GOP Chairman John Kane, a Potomac resident.

But County Council members said they would continue to push an aggressive agenda.

"We didn't run for office just to rake the leaves and tend to tree trimming," Leventhal said. "We've got ideas."

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Subjects: Municipal government, Political power  
Locations: Montgomery County Maryland  
People: Perez, Tom  
Companies: County Council-Montgomery County MD, Democratic Party (Sic:813940 )  
Document types: News  
Section: METRO  
ISSN/ISBN: 01908286  
Text Word Count 816  
Document URL: