

New County Council president announces big plans

Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2005

By Janel Davis
Staff Writer

A week ago — before the County Council elected its new officers — the presumptive president had already outlined legislative and administrative plans for his presidency.

George L. Leventhal said he hopes to have Clarksburg planning issues settled by mid-March and expects the future of the Agricultural Reserve to remain a council priority. A second part of predatory lending legislation is also expected, along with the budget, beginning in March.

Other priorities include affordable housing, access to health care, support for religious communities and protecting domestic workers and the environment.

"My goal when elected to the County Council was to be council president during the last year of my first term," Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said during an interview in his council office in Rockville. "I felt that by that time I would have learned enough and be experienced enough to hold that office. And at this point, I am."

On Tuesday, Leventhal moved up from vice president to council president in a formal vote. Customarily, the vice president moves up to the presidency. The only real question usually is who will be vice president. Both offices are for one-year terms.

Leventhal succeeds Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park as president. Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton is the new vice president.

"My most relevant experience for the [presidency] is the five years I spent as chairman of the Montgomery County Democratic Party," Leventhal said. "It's good experience, especially in an election year when people are trying to carve out their own niche and everyone has their own issues."

Leventhal expects to announce his re-election campaign later this month by a letter to 4,000 of his closest friends.

Focus on council

In the meantime, the education and science consultant has decided to forgo new consulting jobs to focus on the County Council.

"Being an elected official is a full-time job, and it can get to the point when you say, 'I don't want to go to another event,' but I'm the boss of my own schedule and have more flexibility now," Leventhal said. "It didn't start out that way. I took a consulting job right after I got elected, and it didn't work out. I had no time."

The first-time councilman has no doubt he will succeed.

"I ran for County Council because I grew up here and because I also have an absurd amount of self-confidence," Leventhal said. "I am ready for the [presidency] because I trust myself to make the right decisions for the people of Montgomery County." Perez praised his successor's values.

**New officers
County Council officers
are elected to one-year
terms beginning the
first Tuesday in
December. Usually, the
vice president is
elected president.
Council president
earns \$87,694 per year.
All other council
members earn \$79,721
per year.
*President: George L.
Leventhal (D-At large)
of Takoma Park
*Vice President:
Marilyn J. Praisner (D-
Dist. 4) of Calverton**

"I will let other people judge his leadership. I will say that he's been a good friend," Perez said. "He and I share the same values, so some of the issues in the upcoming year will be much of the same [as in my administration]."

The outspoken Leventhal has taken the lead on health care and sponsored legislation for a community pharmacy program. He has pushed for assistance programs for Hurricane Katrina evacuees and healthy food marketing to children.

And he is no stranger to self-promotion. His council Web page contains a list of his accomplishments for 2003 and 2004, which he forwarded to reporters.

To some, Leventhal's "absurd amount of self-confidence" resembles an extreme intensity, bordering on preachy. The councilman said he has battled the intensity label since high school. He prefers to be seen as passionate.

"I don't want to scare people. This is the face and personality that God has given me," he said. "I do like to have a good time, rent videos, travel, etc. But this is an important job, and I take it seriously."

A serious man

He has always taken the job seriously. Before being elected to the council in 2002, Leventhal worked as legislative director for U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) of Baltimore, as a research assistant for Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Texas) and helped state Sen. Ida G. Ruben (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring win her first campaign in 1986.

After his work in the U.S. Senate, Leventhal remained in politics but moved over to head the county Democratic Party until he was elected to the County Council as a candidate on County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's End Gridlock slate.

The slate — including first-time council members Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park and Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown — was designed to push through Duncan's 10-year, \$1 billion transportation plan, which included the Intercounty Connector highway between Gaithersburg and Laurel. Although the slate was key in getting lesser-known candidates elected, Leventhal said he would never again run on a candidate slate.

He is frustrated that the Purple Line linking Bethesda and New Carrollton has not been built and remains a staunch ICC supporter.

"I'm proud of the things that the council has done like passing the smoking ban and reorganizing the fire and rescue division," he said. "Other things like the original taxicab bill are bad and are not working, and we've got to fix those things."

Part of that fixing will include administrative improvements. Leventhal plans to implement a strict timeliness policy, beginning and ending meetings on time. He also plans to work on council members' less than stellar responses to residents' comments, which he attributes to wandering attention spans.