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Bus transit, economy focus of new council president

Berliner, elected to council in 2006, takes reins of Montgomery County's legislative body

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County government is not able to respond fast enough to changes, according to Roger Berliner, who was unanimously approved as the County Council's president Tuesday.

Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac, who will serve a one-year term in the role, said he intends to "nudge us to a more nimble state."

A top priority, he said, will be to ensure Montgomery is able to make necessary adjustments to adopt Bus Rapid Transit — which operates similarly to light rail. A proposed 170-mile rapid bus network is estimated to cost about \$2.5 billion to build and between \$144 million and \$173 million annually to operate.

The County Council on Tuesday also selected Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring, as its vice president.

Berliner served as vice president for the past year, and in 2009. In a split vote in December 2009, the council elected Nancy M. Floreen as council president, abandoning a decades-old tradition by bypassing Berliner, then-council vice president, for council president.

This is Berliner's first time serving as president since his election to the council in 2006. The council president's salary is \$104,022 annually. Council members receive \$94,351 each year.

Berliner said he intends to focus on adjusting to the county's changing demographic. About one-third of the state's Hispanic population now lives in Montgomery County, and, for the first time in 2010, the majority of the county's residents were minorities.

He said the county also needs to continue its focus on economic development, and adjusting to the needs of the business community. As for the budget shortfalls Montgomery has experienced over the past several years, Berliner said the county is not out of the woods yet.

"But there are glimmers of light," he said. "It's time to be a little bolder now."

He echoed that theme in prepared remarks: "...we can take comfort in the resilience of our county and its unchallenged position as the economic engine of our state ... we are

beginning to regain our balance and there may be a faint gleam of light at the end of this long dark economic tunnel.”