

INTERVIEW BY HOWARD AND DIANA KOHN

Valerie Ervin did not grow up poor – her dad was an Air Force officer – but, for several years after leaving home, she had to watch her pennies. She lived with her two young sons in subsidized housing and clerked at a Safeway checkout counter.

A quarter-century later those years remain far more than a biographical footnote. Despite the success story she is today, a union organizer who climbed the ranks and moved to politics and won election to the Montgomery County Council in 2006, she says, “I’ll always remember what it’s like to work very hard and have very little.”

Not that she’s had a sweet ride for any stage of her life. She organized workers in the catfish factories of Mississippi, the poultry factories of North Carolina, and the ranches of New Mexico where, as a previous Voice feature article about Valerie noted, “an African-American woman in her position was a rare and sometimes unwelcome sight.”

Elected to represent Silver Spring and Takoma Park (District Five), Valerie came into office just as the County was about to enter its own era of financial struggle, an experience alien to many who live here. Two years later, she and the rest of the Council are now trying to rein in annual costs that exceed this fiscal year’s revenues by \$500 million.

One morning a couple weeks ago, over breakfast in a bag, Valerie took stock of the situation.

What’s your analysis of the budget? Where are you going to cut?

This is a tough question. How do you close this huge gap without furloughs, lay-offs, or severe cuts to library services, recreation services, and every kind of service residents take for granted? Public safety, education, and the health and human services safety net are the most important things, and even they will likely be squeezed.

On the County level, there’s very little money for road and school repairs. We currently have no money for bridge repairs in Takoma Park, which is at the top of the priority list for Mayor Williams and the City Council. We’re hoping this project will be covered by the federal stimulus package.

The silver lining of the economic downturn is that our congressmen and senators are really engaged with County issues. They are calling and asking us, what do we need? Local issues have become national priorities.

We’ve always seemed sheltered from a recession. What’s different this time?

Historically, we’ve had a solid housing market, and unemployment has never been a problem, but housing is way down, and we are losing jobs, especially second jobs. Macy’s and Sears laid off workers. Circuit City closed. These are places where people had second jobs to cover the cost of their mortgage. That’s a huge problem. Income tax revenues are off mainly because of job loss.

We know help is coming in the form of federal money for infrastructure. For people who have never worked construction, especially women, it will be an opportunity for new job training. And it’ll be an opportunity for small local businesses to get government contracts.

So construction here will move away from housing to infrastructure?

We’ve already moved away from housing. New housing units dropped by about 7,000 units last year, a disconcerting collapse. Our growth was 0.08 percent, which is really no growth. If people aren’t buying and selling homes, we don’t get recordation taxes, impact taxes, and so on. Revenue from real estate dropped about 40 percent.

For years we’ve been blessed with loads of riches from property taxes and real estate taxes, but the housing market is no longer sustainable. Even before the downturn, we actually were starting to run out of space. Montgomery County was planned to grow to a million people, and we’re almost at that point.

Certainly the roads seem saturated.

We need more transit, more ways of moving people around other than cars, such as the Purple Line and rapid-bus lanes. To the extent we can do more building and revitalize neighborhoods, we have to build smart, near transit. Growth was always supposed to be along the traffic corridors, Georgia Avenue, Rockville Pike, I-270. In

the outer rings there was supposed to be less growth. That’s why the Agricultural Reserve was created in perpetuity.

We want to maintain the Agricultural Reserve. We want to maintain our tree canopy. We want to be very cognizant of our environment. So I don’t think we’re going to grow that much more.

This is the new reality? Growth is over and done?

That’s a conversation progressive people need to have. In the last decade the tensions here have been around growth. When I ran in 2006, the question was growth or no growth. Well, the reality now is that there’s no growth. And no growth dramatically impacts budget revenues and can infringe on quality of life. Less revenue means more difficult choices and fewer services.

These aren’t easy issues. We need to pause and think. I believe we’re about to experience a paradigm shift. The way to get America back to work is to build sustainable communities, the green-collar economy Obama talks about. Job growth is a good thing, and development on its face is not a bad thing. It’s the way growth is implemented.

One theory is that the Purple Line will bring growth.

Actually, if you follow the Purple Line from Chevy Chase all the way to New Carrollton, the only place that’s really expected to grow is Langley Park, the International Corridor. Since Langley Park is in two counties we’re developing a bi-county sector plan. It doesn’t happen very often that you sit down with your counterparts in Prince George’s County and work out a vision for the next 50 years.

This is one of the most important things I’m doing right now because nobody has paid much attention to Langley Park during the conversation about the Purple Line.

In Prince George’s individuals talk about green-field development because they have still have tracts of open land. Some would like to build through the roof in Langley Park, which would cause major gentrification. I’m opposed to that. We need to preserve the flavor of the area and its culture. We should revitalize the area, not create a boomtown.

Housing is the most obvious change that’s needed. Many of the multi-family

units are in horrible condition and need to be rehabilitated. Even if a family hasn’t got the means to buy a house, they should be able to move up into a nicer multi-family building. Montgomery Housing Partnership has created great examples in this area.

Will the immigrants who’ve started small businesses be allowed to stay?

They’re worried they’ll get moved out. That’s part of the challenge of working with Prince George’s. But one reason we want the Purple Line to run down University Boulevard is to encourage a boulevard experience and keep those small, local businesses.

Langley Park is all about micro-businesses and mom-and-pops, and they’re thriving. These are not throw-away businesses. It’s a different kind of shopping. There’s bartering going on. It’s like the local economies in countries where these folks come from, all the Diaspora of West Africa, Central America, and South America. That’s why it’s called the International Corridor.

You’ve been working with local businesses to create a kind of alternative to the Chamber of Commerce.

I have been working with LEDC to serve businesses that may not have the resources to join the Chamber of Commerce. This is not an alternative to the Chamber but an additional resource. We want the people who live here to think about shopping at small local shops or dining at small local restaurants. The organization is succeeding in Wheaton and Silver Spring, and we also plan to reach out to Langley Park and Takoma Park.

I hosted a meeting along with the County Executive about a year and a half ago at the old Silver Spring firehouse. More than 200 small business owners from Silver Spring attended. I was blown away. I think the County Executive was blown away, too.

A lot of people stood up and said, we stayed in Silver Spring through the entire redevelopment, and what did we get? We didn’t get anything.

What are they getting now?

They’re getting networking, collective