

Vote “yes” on Question C – Smaller districts, less power for moneyed interests.

by Neal Potter and Phil Andrews

Published in the Washington Post October 21, 2004

Passing Question C on the Montgomery County ballots would change the make-up of the County Council from five district and four at-large members to nine district members. This would create a more community-based county government. Each councilmember would be elected from a district with a population of about 110,000 – about half the size of the current districts and almost a tenth the size of the million-resident at-large district.

The smaller districts will make campaigns for County Council less costly. More well-qualified citizens will be able to run, and, once elected they will be better known to their constituents, and more responsive to their views rather than to those of wealthy contributors. Minorities – who now account for nearly 40 percent of County residents – also will have a better chance to run and win. In 55 years, only one minority has been elected to an at-large position.

Now, candidates for the at-large seats are unable to become personally known to a significant fraction of the nearly 1,000,000 people they seek to represent. They depend on advertising through the media, and mass mailings at high costs which make them dependent on large contributions rather than personal contact. The large contributions come largely from development interests. And the price to run a serious campaign for at-large councilmember is at least \$150,000 – as opposed to the \$50,000 or so needed to seriously contest a district race.

In 2002, all four successful at-large candidates — members of the self described “End Gridlock” slate — received close to or more than half of their campaign funds from real estate interests, either directly or through their slate. (For details visit www.neighborspac.org).

The result is a Council which favors removing the controls on development which are necessary to prevent congestion on highways and in the schools, and to limit the heavy costs involved in trying to serve rapid development.

Elections have consequences. In 2003, the “End Gridlock” Council majority made gridlock worse when it voted to allow development to proceed in areas that had been under moratoria because of traffic congestion. The Council majority also voted to eliminate a critical traffic mitigation test, sticking taxpayers with the bill for tens of millions of dollars of road improvements that developers would have been required to pay.

This year the “End Gridlock” majority approved an economic development strategy to increase jobs faster than housing. This will worsen gridlock — and make housing still less affordable as demand further outstrips supply.

It’s no coincidence that a majority of the at-large councilmembers voted for each of these policies, while a majority of the district councilmembers opposed them. The high cost of running countywide penalizes at-large candidates who favor slower growth.

A poll several years ago showed that half of County residents wanted slower growth and nearly half thought the rate of growth about right. Only one percent of County residents thought the County should grow faster. What that one percent believes matters more than the 99 percent – because of their campaign contributions.

Developers are trying to defeat Question C because it would end their dominance provided through at-large elections. Candidates running in smaller districts can offset developer dollars by knocking on doors and can raise the funds needed for a district campaign.

Voters tempted to keep the current system because of the ability to vote for five council members should consider whether a system that breeds dependency on development industry contributions is in the public interest.

A broad range of organizations – the Sierra Club, the Montgomery County Civic Federation, the Taxpayers League and Common Cause – have endorsed this good government measure to bring county government closer to the people.

With nearly one million people, Montgomery County is now too large for countywide council elections. A vote for Question C is a vote for more contacts of candidates with voters, more competition, more opportunities for minorities, and for ending the undue influence of development interests in County Council elections.

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