

Low profile makes Knapp Montgomery's stealth councilman

by David Abrams
Staff Writer

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ROCKVILLE -- Maybe the deck was stacked against Michael Knapp from the start. After all, the other three freshmen on the Montgomery County Council are more seasoned politicians.

There's Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, a former mayor and planning board commissioner. George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park is a former chairman of the county's Democratic Party who has a propensity for cross-examining people as if they are testifying on Capitol Hill. And Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park is a former federal prosecutor who is quick with a sound bite.

But Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown came to the council from behind the scenes. He's the quiet one -- a businessman whose style resembles something seen in a boardroom rather than a council chamber.

"I think that the thing that makes government work on the public service side is getting things done," said Knapp, 37, an executive with Celera Genomics Inc. in Rockville.

"I don't think I'll ever really grandstand on anything," he added, wincing a little at his word choice. "It's just not my nature."

Knapp does poke fun at himself.

Whenever a contentious vote has come up, especially in his first few months on the council, each of his eight colleagues took turns speechifying. Knapp waited until everyone else had had their say, then echoed their remarks. If someone spoke after he did, he would quip, "I'm

supposed to be the last one to talk."

Knapp's subdued public personality does not surprise Stephen Smet, president of the Greater Olney Civic Association.

"There's no reason to talk if there's nothing to add to the conversation, and that's a corporate way of doing business," he said.

It's also smart politics, said one political observer.

"He's not alienated anybody," said Bethesda pollster G. Keith Haller. "He's gotten along with his colleagues. He may not be outspoken, but that's not necessarily the smartest path for a new politician."

But recently, Knapp has been speaking out more and stepping out more.

Smet said he was a little surprised to see so much of Knapp at the group's regular meetings. When a hot topic is on tap, as many as 100 people could show up, but one meeting Knapp attended recently only had about 20 people.

"Mike shows up because he just knows it's on the calendar, so it's nice to see a politician show up because it shows he's following the pulse of the community," Smet said.

Following the pulse of that community is no easy task. Knapp's sprawling district extends across the upcounty and includes established communities of Olney in the east, Poolesville in the west and Damascus in the center, all the way north to the exploding areas of Germantown and Clarksburg.

In order to get his name out, he has used such gimmicks as having campaign volunteers stitch "Knapp time" pillows or holding community forums he calls "Open Mike."

So far, there hasn't been much of a voting record to judge Knapp on, but some of his actions demonstrate how business savvy, networking and building strategic partnerships have informed his

political life.

Last fall, Knapp could not have won his election against three-term Republican incumbent Councilwoman Nancy H. Dacek without help from County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) and his End Gridlock slate. End Gridlock focused in part on electing a council that would back Duncan's ambitious Go Montgomery! transportation plan, whose centerpiece is the \$1 billion Intercounty Connector highway between Gaithersburg and Laurel.

Current council members on the slate also included Floreen, Leventhal, Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg and Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring.

End Gridlock contributed \$26,000, free advertising and a key endorsement from Duncan in the bitter general campaign. Knapp won by a narrow 1,584-vote margin out of 51,167 votes cast.

In his first vote, Knapp and other slate members repaid Duncan for his help by backing the ICC.

Dacek, a staunch opponent of the road and a member of the previous council majority opposing it, called Knapp a puppet of Duncan during the campaign.

Chuck Young, a Democrat and one of Knapp's opponents in the primary, said people will be watching Knapp to make sure he is not beholden to development interests, which gave generously to his campaign and the End Gridlock slate.

"The question is, will he then vote along the ways of what the people are telling him or what contributors want him to do?" he said. "In politics, that's where the rubber meets the road."

Knapp said he supports a proposed impact tax on developers to pay for school construction, even though he has been criticized for voting to defer the measure until fall. He just wants to make sure the rules are the same for everyone, he said.

Aris Mardirossian, a Gaithersburg businessman

active in county politics, agreed.

"There's no process or rigid formula when someone comes in that this is what they need to do," said Mardirossian, a contributor to Knapp's campaign. "I could not build homes in Montgomery County. I'm lucky that I don't."

Like many politicians, Knapp began his political education as an intern on Capitol Hill.

Just days after graduating high school in 1984, his parents drove him to Washington, D.C., from the small New York town where he grew up to take up an internship with U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.). In 1990, he became an adviser to U.S. Sen. Peter V. Domenici (R-N.M.), specializing in biotechnology, health care and social issues.

That was followed by a time when Knapp was part of a group that started the National Center for Genome Resources in New Mexico, a nonprofit that develops computer systems to track genetic information. A for-profit company established by the group was sold to pay for the operation of the nonprofit.

Shortly afterward, he moved to Germantown, where he became involved with the Germantown Alliance. He is still vice president of Germantown HELP, a food bank.

Today, when he's not doing council work or meeting with constituents, Knapp is an executive with Celera, the company that decoded the human genome. Since being sworn in as a councilman, he has shifted his duties as director of business development from seeking out new clients to cultivating old ones.

Like several of his council colleagues, Knapp balances two jobs. He tries to spend 18 hours a week at Celera, and talks with many of his clients by phone at night; because many of them are in Japan, the night hours work well.

A typical day includes breakfast meetings, council work and time at Celera, followed by meetings and events to touch base with residents -- and

those overseas business calls.

Time permitting, the 6-foot-4 Knapp will squeeze in a pickup game of basketball at Matsunaga Elementary School in Germantown, and he is a devoted runner -- even if he has to get it in a six-mile run late at night.

Although his schedule is demanding, Knapp said it is easier than the rigor of running a campaign as a challenger and getting through a complex spring budget process when he had little time to spend with his wife, Kathy, and daughters Lindsay, 6, and Sydney, 4. Now he has flexibility to attend Lindsay's swim meets and coach Sydney's soccer team in the fall.

Knapp has no plans to quit his Celera job.

"You can try to say, 'Well, I'm still just Mike,'" he said. "But it changes some interaction with the way people deal with you whether you like it or not. So to continue to have that outside job gives you a very different perspective."

Much of Knapp's work in the beginning of his term has been on budget-related topics. He credits some of his successes with another business principle: marketing.

Despite looming cuts to programs and delaying pay increases for county employees, several issues important to Knapp's district have fared well.

Knapp said he has taken several council members on tours of his district to familiarize them with issues there. And he says those first-hand experiences have paid off.

For example, the council voted to buy the BlackRock Center for the Arts for \$4 million when faced with a threat that the Germantown facility could close for lack of money. Keeping the arts center open was key to building a community where people can live and work, Knapp said. Possible cuts to fire stations in his district were also avoided.

Knapp also wants people to know more about his district, including the 90,000-plus-acre

agricultural reserve. The land set aside from development is often talked about as preserving open space, but Knapp said people do not realize the economic benefits of agriculture -- a \$300 million industry that includes a handful of dairy farmers and livestock producers, as well as places to buy pumpkins or go on a hay ride.

"People throughout the county need to understand why those things are tangible to them," he said. "People that live next to the ag reserve get it, but people who live in Bethesda probably don't, because many of them have probably never been through the ag reserve or don't even recognize it exists."

Knapp also plans to make changes to the county's fire and rescue service to improve emergency preparedness: Incentives need to be added to encourage more volunteers, the chain of command needs to be clearer, and standards such as tire pressure on vehicles need to be instituted. Current regulations are too murky, and assign the same responsibility to different divisions, which leads to finger pointing, he said.

"Everybody can point in the other direction and say it's not their fault, and they would be right," he said.

Haller said the challenge for Knapp is to become more outspoken.

"He needs greater visibility," Haller said. "He needs to become known for something in a fairly demonstrative way, whether its one project or one issue, and put his focus behind it. He needs to be vigilant about pushing upcounty issues, and not being pigeonholed as the business representative on the council."