

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **We was robbed!**

by Jim Humphrey, MCCF delegate and District 1 resident

This past Tuesday, December 1, five of the nine members of the County Council discarded a decades old tradition of electing the sitting Council Vice President as their President for the following year. The means to this power grab was a shift in the balance of power on the Council that occurred last year when, in a special election, voters chose Nancy Navarro to fill the District 4 seat left vacant by the death of Don Praisner. Praisner had been elected in 2007 following the death of his wife Marilyn, to serve the remainder of her term. With Navarro's election a new pro-development majority was formed that made this week's coup possible.

A Washington Post editorial advised that the orderly process for electing Council leaders, which would have seen Vice President Roger Berliner ascend to the Presidency for the coming year, "has helped the Council mute its internal politicking and maintain a modicum of stability." A Gazette editorial cautioned that "changing the well-intended and functional succession process would likely create a hostile environment for elected leaders for years," and would encourage year-round politicking for leadership of the Council. But on Tuesday Mike Knapp, George Leventhal, Valerie Ervin and Ms. Navarro chose to disregard this advice and usurp the Presidency for clique mate Nancy Floreen.

Reprinted here in their entirety are the remarks made by District 1 Councilmember Berliner on being denied the Council leadership role that he deserved, had earned, and was denied.

"My colleagues. A majority has spoken, and majority rules. But regrettably, not always wisely. And I do believe that abandoning a 50 year tradition that has served us well is most unwise.

"I am not alone in thinking that this is wrong. Our Council has received strong protests from homeowner associations, democratic precinct chairs, and scores of individuals from throughout the county urging my colleagues to set aside their individual grievances for the larger common good. And the Washington Post and the Gazette have both expressed their view that the majority has taken us into dangerous waters, where might is right, where because you can, you do. That has not been Montgomery County's way. We take understandable pride in a different kind of politics here. Not this kind. This is bad politics and even worse governance.

"I certainly appreciate that our first three years have been marked by unprecedented tragedies. First Marilyn's death, from which we never recovered, then her husband's. And with Councilmember Navarro's election, it is said, and this vote appears to confirm, there is a new majority. "Elections matter," I am told. And I agree.

"But the election that matters in this context is not the special election, but the election that occurred many months earlier when there was an election for Vice President. It is that election that has always determined our Council President; today's vote was always a formality. Abandoning that tradition, and effectively overturning that unanimous decision, destabilizes and further politicizes this institution we serve, and does a disservice to our County.

"Moreover, it is not as though the new majority is without ample means to demonstrate that "elections matter," whether on how and where we grow or other issues. Legislation requires five votes. They have five votes. They have the power. Already four of the five members hold powerful committee chairmanships. That's power. Today they could have used their power to elect a Vice President that more closely reflects their point of view, someone who would become Council President in the first year of a new four year term.

That's power. But apparently that is not enough power. And that's where I believe the majority errs. It should have been enough.

"A number of my colleagues have expressed their unhappiness with me for standing up in defense of the tradition that has served us so well. I do not apologize for it. I did not seek this debate; I did not want this division. I have a deep and abiding commitment to finding common ground, which my record on this Council reflects. But this is wrong. And I have a fundamentally different view from those of my colleagues who have suggested that abandoning a 50 year practice that determines the leadership of our Council is a private matter. It is most assuredly not a private matter. It is, by definition, a very public issue. And if the light cast by the public nature of this debate has not been flattering, do not blame the messenger.

"And one message that has come through loud and clear is that this is an issue that many of my constituents in District 1 feel strongly about. They have never had a Council President since districts were first created more than twenty years ago. This was their turn too. So, I am not sorry for standing my ground and fighting for what so many perceive to be the long-term welfare of our institution or simple fairness for my constituents.

"This clearly is not an auspicious beginning to what is going to be a very difficult year. Going forward, my commitment is the same as it has always been – to represent the good people of District 1 and all of our county to the best of my ability, to fight hard for a sustainable future for us all, and to work in good spirit to find common ground. I thank my colleagues and the many residents of our County who hoped for a different outcome."

Well said, Mr. Berliner.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*