

Planning board key to economic development

Because of the sad loss of Jean Cryor, the Montgomery County Council must appoint a new member to the Planning Board early in 2010. Even more significantly, Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson's term will expire in the summer of 2010 and the council will need to appoint a new chairman. Both of these decisions have critical implications for the county's future.

Montgomery County's September 2009 unemployment rate of 5.3 percent, while still low compared to the national rate, is at a historic high and is more than double the rate in April 2008. While Fairfax County gained 42,743 jobs between 2001 and 2008, Montgomery County gained only 7,855 jobs during that time period, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Reduced employment is a primary reason that projected income tax revenues for this year and next are more than \$200 million less than earlier projections: \$200 million that will have to be sliced out of schools, libraries, parks, police, fire and rescue or other vital county services.

There are many economic factors that are beyond county government's control, including the banking crisis, trade imbalances, globalization of industry and more. But one area where we have significant influence is in the direction of our Planning Board, which has substantial say in which jobs are generated and how rapidly.

Two major employers — Hilton Hotels and National Public Radio — actively considered locating in Montgomery County in the last few years and both opted not to come here. Although many factors contributed to these employers' decisions, a key issue was the lack of certainty regarding whether new office space would be approved expeditiously by the Planning Board. One of the few bright spots on the local economic scene has been the commitment by Live Nation to lease a new Fillmore nightclub in downtown Silver Spring. Yet the Planning Board has engaged in negotiations with the county executive's staff and the property owner grudgingly, and it is still not known whether the adjacent hotel/office building, which is a key component in the Fillmore deal, will meet the board's approval.

My purpose is not to criticize Chairman [Royce] Hanson, a distinguished and visionary public servant, or his hard-working fellow commissioners. However, as I weigh who will earn my vote to fill upcoming Planning Board seats, the following questions will be paramount for me:

- Do applicants understand that we can no longer take for granted that Montgomery County is a magnet for investment?
- Are applicants willing to see economic development as part of the Planning Board's role and to work toward a more effective partnership with the executive and council to generate jobs and restore our county's economic health?
- Will applicants commit to streamlining and expediting project approvals, even as we continue to provide ample opportunity for public input?

Every branch of county government must focus on the jobs crisis. If we fail to do so, the debate in coming years will no longer be how to manage our growth, as it has been in the past, but rather how to stem our decline.

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