

FOR BETTER GOVERNMENT - VOTE YES ON C

by
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When you go to the polls on November 2, in addition to casting a ballot for the Presidency of the United States and ballots for representatives to our Federal government, you will also have the opportunity to help select three members of the Montgomery County Board of Education. And you will be asked to vote yes or no on three so-called "ballot issues" or propositions: these are named, cleverly, propositions A, B, and C. I'm writing this article to urge you to VOTE YES ON C and, in what follows, I'll try to explain why. But first I want to counter a lot of negative chatter you'll be hearing that attempts to convince you that all three propositions are bad because they are being supported by people who want to wreck Montgomery County government. I - and the many people like me who are working in support of proposition C - have no connection with ballot issues A or B and take no position on either one of them. Anything you may hear to the contrary is a simple lie.

Now, as to Proposition C: Simply stated, C proposes a change in the County Charter so that the County will be divided into NINE districts and that, from each district we will elect ONE council member. At present there are FIVE districts, from each of which ONE council member is elected, and there are an additional FOUR seats on the County Council for which candidates run "at-large". You can go to the County Website to find out who the "district" councilmembers and who the "at-large" councilmembers are: for this particular discussion, it doesn't really matter who is who. Many months ago, as one of your representatives to the Montgomery County Civic Federation, I asked you to sign a petition to put this issue on the ballot. Thanks to many of you - and a total of over 15,000 other registered voters of Montgomery County - the Civic Fed petition drive was successful! Now a new group has been formed, called, cleverly, "Vote Yes On C", to campaign for passage of this charter amendment. If you don't have the time for more details, the take home message is VOTE YES ON C. If you have time but would prefer to look at the details later, check out our website: <http://www.VoteYesonC.org>. If you DO have a bit more time now, let me give you some reasons why you should vote yes on C, and let me counter some reasons you will hear about that are being used to argue you should vote no.

1. We believe that everyone can see our County Government is NOT working. Because of the actions of the County Executive, and the failure of the Council to control those actions, Montgomery County has grown much too fast and has failed to build the infrastructure needed to support the rapid growth. Roads, schools, parks, and all aspects of public support have not been expanded at a rate commensurate with the construction of homes. Why? Because developers and other special interest groups (land use lawyers for example) have convinced our elected officials that they (the special interests) cannot make an "adequate profit" if the costs of construction are made to include the true costs of maintaining

adequate public facilities ("quality of life") to support this rapid growth. And how have the special interests wielded such undo influence? Because they have provided, by their campaign contributions, the increasing amounts of money needed to run political campaigns in our increasingly large county - especially the funds needed to run "at-large" campaigns. [To see a detailed study of the sources of funding in the last County Council election, check out www.neighborspac.org, the website of Neighbors for a Better Montgomery PAC.] We need to restructure the County Council so it is more responsive to the needs of the many, rather than the wishes of the few. Proposition C is one of many ways in which we might hope to achieve such restructuring.

2. With the population of Montgomery County rapidly reaching nearly one million, the costs of running a campaign for an at-large seat have reached approximately \$250,000; no candidate can raise this kind of money via small donations from individual voters, nor can an at-large candidate make contact with even a small percentage of the nearly one million people he/she proposes to represent. Even the five districts have a population of nearly 200,000 each and the costs of a campaign for a district seat are approximately \$50,000. While candidates for district seats CAN raise a significant percent of the need funds from individual voters and CAN make contact with a significant percentage of their "constituency", the tasks are daunting and discourage all but a very few from running for office. Our population has become very diverse over the last two decades, but our elected councilmembers do not reflect that. By changing our Council structure to one composed of nine councilmembers, each of whom is elected from a district representing a little more than 100,000 people, we will reduce the costs of running a campaign for a council seat to the level where a candidate CAN raise most of the needed money from individual contributors and we will make it possible for candidates to meet and talk with a significant number of the voters they hope will elect them. More people will find it possible to campaign for these important public offices, and this will increase the chance that successful candidates will be more representative of our demographics. In short, our government will have a chance at being more democratic.

3. Passing proposition C does not guarantee an improved County Council. Special interest groups will still have the opportunity to make large campaign contributions in the hopes of having special influence over Council decisions. But candidates who do not want to take such contributions and be subject to such influences will at least have the possibility of running true grass roots campaigns with a realistic chance of convincing the voters in their district to give them a shot at doing things better. There is no guarantee that Proposition C will solve our problems, but we have to try: it is the essence of democracy that, when things are not working, you try to modify the system to make it better.

Now as to the reasons you may hear attempting to convince you to vote no on C:

1. Many feel that Montgomery County is doing just fine and that our programs,

policies and public officials are the envy of counties across the nation. These people are living in the past. While we have an admirable past record, we have slipped badly in recent years. Our schools are neither as good as they used to be, nor are they as good as we should be making them. Despite the fact that the County Executive used developer contributions to fund the election of an "end gridlock" slate to the Council, our transportation woes are increasing steadily as we continue to build, build, build. And so on. Do any of you think our quality of life is as good as it was ten years ago?

2. Some will tell you that "at-large" councilmembers, being elected by the entire county, represent the entire county and take the "broad view" on all issues, whereas councilmembers elected from districts are more "parochial" in their views and do not consider critical issues from a countywide perspective. A simple look at voting records will show you that district-based councilmembers like Mr. Andrews and Mr. Perez have consistently voted in the best interests of the entire population of our county; in contrast, the at-large councilmembers have a truly parochial record of consistently voting for the special needs of the special interests that funded their campaigns.

3. And finally, you will be told that, while now you vote for FIVE members of the Council, if C passes, you will only vote for ONE councilmember. And that is true. But you now have and will continue to have the right (and duty) to contact ALL councilmembers when you feel they need to consider your opinion on an issue. And what is the value of voting for five councilmembers when four of them know nothing about you and care not at all about your needs or opinions?

BOTTOM LINE? Vote Yes on C. It's a vote for better government in Montgomery County.

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