

Montgomery Seeks More Planning Job Candidates

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Help wanted: Visionary leader who believes in "smart growth," transit-friendly communities and moderate-income housing. Ability to resist developer pressures, fend off special requests from local politicians and lend an ear to neighborhood groups. The skill to manage a creative staff, watch over a multimillion-dollar budget and achieve consensus very helpful. Salary up to \$150,000. Apply to the Montgomery County Council.

Widely seen as one of the best jobs in the country for ambitious policymakers, the chairmanship of the Montgomery Planning Board so far has drawn only two applicants: embattled incumbent Derick P. Berlage and Gerald R. Clichy, a planner and former director of the county's transportation department who has unsuccessfully vied for the job before.

Berlage said in an eight-page application letter to the council late last week that he possesses the right combination of leadership skills and vision about planning to fix a system critics say has foundered under lax leadership and weak management.

"I believe my extensive knowledge and experience in land use issues, my record of accomplishment over the last four years, and my practical intellectual vision for the county's future makes an especially strong case for reappointment," he wrote in laying out his case for a second four-year term.

See PLANNING, B2. Col. 6

Applicant Pool Is Too Small For Some

PLANNING, *From B1*

But many council members, themselves under intense scrutiny for their mixed record supervising the planning process in Montgomery, are leery about reappointing Berlage, 49, a former council colleague and lawyer named to the job four years ago. Unlike many jurisdictions, the planning agency in Montgomery County is not part of the executive branch but reports directly to the council, which holds the key to Berlage's future.

That future looks uncertain.

"At this point, Derick does not have a majority who are certain to vote for his reappointment," said council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), who is running for county executive and who four years ago played a key role in installing Berlage as planning board chairman.

Adding to the murky political landscape, he added: "But that can't be read as five members who want Berlage to go."

Polls show that Montgomery voters are increasingly concerned about the county's growth, putting pressure on council members in an election year to demonstrate leadership on an issue that has long been considered one of the county's strengths — planning and zoning. The council has been encouraging others to apply for the job, which involves overseeing the sprawling Department of Park and Planning. It has an annual budget of about \$100 million.

Ed McMahan, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, said he wasn't surprised that few applicants were vying for the post after the county's reputation for careful planning was damaged by last year's discovery of building irregularities at Clarksburg Town Center, a community of 1,300 new homes in northern Montgomery.

"Either people think it is a done deal, that Derick will be reappointed, or people are turned off by the problems associated with the agency," he said.

Council members, who say they want a competitive field, have begun to step up their search. They have contacted prospective applicants and put out news releases but have not placed ads in publications aimed at planning professionals.

"The challenge is that the message . . . that the playing field is absolutely open is hard for people to accept with Derick's name still in the mix," said council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), a former Planning Board member and frequent Berlage critic. "I think we are really looking for someone to lead the challenged agency into a new era without any of the trappings and the baggage of the past year."

Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said he, too, wants to see more applicants.

"I want to encourage anyone to apply," he said. "I am eager to have a competitive pool of applicants, and I am trying to bring that about. . . . If, and it is a big if, we reappoint Derick, he is in a stronger position if he emerges from a crowded field."

Council members also have discussed extending their self-imposed April 12 deadline for applicants. Berlage's term expires in June.

Berlage said he is eager to stay on the job so he can lead efforts to right the agency he admits has stumbled. He said he is well positioned to provide "continuity" and institutional knowledge.

Continuity has been in short supply. Last week, the agency's general counsel, Michele Rosenfeld, who has worked there for nearly 17 years, announced her resignation. She declined to comment. Last year, the executive director, Charles Loehr, decided to retire early as the public outcry over Clarksburg intensified.

William H. Hudnut, the mayor of the town of Chevy Chase, whose residents have fought the planning agency on a range of issues, said it may be time for a change.

"A new broom sweeps clean," he said. "It would be nice if there is a new broom in there."