

Big Job in Montgomery

The county's future rides on making a smart choice to head the planning board.

MONTGOMERY County is poised to make a major change in leadership, and, no, this time we are not talking about the race for county executive but rather the upcoming appointment of a chairman to lead the all-important planning board. County residents who care about the future shape of their community would do well to pay attention as the County Council moves to fill this crucial job this month.

Land use, as more than one county official will tell you, is religion in Montgomery County, and the chairman of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission is its high priest. With a budget of some \$100 million, the agency oversees development projects, runs the county park system and advises the council on how Montgomery should be shaped. County Council President George Leventhal (D-At Large) says he cannot think of a more important job than leading "a group charged with developing a vision of what this county will look like in the future . . . protecting the things that make it special while helping it change."

The importance of the five-member board was underscored by the long-running controversy surrounding violations of building requirements in a Clarksburg development. Those events, contributing to the departure of chairman Derick P. Berlage, bring attention to

the challenges facing the board and its new chairman. There has been a loss of talented staff and its sense of mission. The agency needs to be rebuilt and trust restored.

After some initial stumbles — the failure to conduct a nationwide search amid allegations that the fix was in for one candidate — the council is well-positioned with a strong field of candidates who have relevant experience and a good knowledge of the county. Moreover, council members should be commended for their efforts to make the process as public as possible — posting all applications on the Web, holding public interviews and giving civic leaders time to conduct their own review. By many accounts they thus far have avoided the temptation that too often afflicts public bodies to hash out an agreement behind closed doors. While some candidates have emerged as favorites, there does not appear to be any who has the five votes needed for appointment.

Big issues face this increasingly urban county — from providing houses that people can afford to improving transportation to preserving the open, green space that gives Montgomery its soul. The planning board must be at the forefront of coming up with these answers — and that fact alone should be in the minds of council members when they make their choice on who should be the next chairman.