

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Veteran Tapped To Chair Planners

By ANN E. MARIMOW
Washington Post Staff Writer

Montgomery County officials reached into their past yesterday to try to restore credibility at the planning agency that has been skewered for poor management and lapses in oversight of development in Clarksburg.

County Council members tapped Royce Hanson, a nationally recognized land-use expert, as Planning Board chairman — a role he held from 1972 to 1981.

Hanson, 74, emerged as a leading candidate after he served as an unpaid consultant to the council after the discovery of construction problems at Clarksburg Town Center. He issued a harsh critique of what he said were systemic problems at the Department of Park and Planning, which the board oversees.

"This is not a guy that pulls any punches on what he thinks is right. And we know he can handle the job because he's done it before," council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said in a statement after the unanimous vote. "County residents deserve — and expect — good government and good management. They expect stability and predictability."

The council's decision puts Hanson in charge of trying to repair a \$100 million agency that he concluded in January was in disarray. Although the department was once a national model of efficiency, Hanson found low morale among staff members and a concern that "they have become a development production agency."

Hanson, a George Washington University research professor, blamed the problems partly on "an unconscionable dereliction of responsibility" that led to lax oversight. He also said the council failed to watch over development.

Four high-ranking planning officials have resigned since the Clarksburg controversy. Hanson will replace the outgoing chairman, Derick P. Berlage, who withdrew his application for a second four-year term in May, amid signals that the council might not confirm him.



BY MICHAEL TEICHNER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Royce Hanson criticized planners after problems at Clarksburg Town Center were discovered.

County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) is expected to approve Hanson's appointment to the position, which pays \$150,000 a year.

Hanson brings a forthright, assertive style to the county's most powerful nonelected position. The job is to advise the council and oversee the county's park system and the development of major housing and commercial projects.

"When Royce is in charge, you know he's in charge," said former council member Esther Gelman, who served on the Planning Board with Hanson.



Hanson was Planning Board chairman from 1972 to 1981.

"No one will try to play games with him. No one will try to make it a little too small or a little too high. There will be hands-on management. That's what is missing."

Hanson's selection is expected to return the board and the department to its traditional planning role, which he described yesterday as "the institutional trustee for the future of the county."

His emphasis, he said, would be "to think hard about where this maturing county needs to be" in its older neighborhoods and employment centers and in its newer communities that are still developing.

Council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda) said he hoped Hanson's leadership would signal a "return to the glory days" when the county had a nationally renowned reputation for planning. Hanson is one of the architects of the county's agricultural reserve program, which protects more than one-fourth of the county's land. He played a primary role in creating the first policy in the region to try to ensure that roads and other infrastructure keep pace with growth.

With that experience, said former Planning Board chairman Gus Bauman, who served from 1989 to 1993, Hanson would be able to "go before the council and bang his hands on the table when he thinks something needs to be done and they may not be listening. He has no compunction about doing that."

Even so, two council members who voted for Hanson expressed concern yesterday that such

passionate advocacy would not be enough. Council members Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) and Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) said it would take a council committed to controlling development to tackle problems such as traffic congestion and affordable housing.

"Royce Hanson's appointment is necessary to restore the standing of the Planning Board, but it's not sufficient to get a handle on controlling growth," Andrews said.

Hanson was selected from a field of nine candidates interviewed by the council. He was supported by leading environmental groups and was one of three contenders identified as "most qualified" by a coalition of civic organizations.

Before the unanimous vote, council member Michael L. Subin (D-At Large) made a pitch for another candidate, because, he said, "we need somebody who knows the system but has no preconceived notions about what is going on in the system."

Subin threw his support behind David C. Gardner, a lawyer who has represented businesses and community associations in zoning cases, before ultimately backing Hanson.

Agricultural leaders also expressed reservations that Hanson might be too opinionated on the development of farmland. The Montgomery County Farm Bureau president said his members want to reserve the right to build homes on their property for their children.

"We're trying to get the young people to stay on the farm, and they're not going to stay if they can't build a house on it," said George Lechluder, who owns 246 acres near Laytonsville. "We're not saying he's a bad man. We think he's a fine gentleman, but his ideas are different from ours."

Hanson defended his record of listening to disparate opinions, explaining that one of his rules is that "it's important to get smarter."

"You never learn anything if you're never willing to change your mind," he said.

Hanson's pressing assignment is to fix an agency "that is not working as it should," said Rick Sullivan Jr., a Maryland-National Capital Building Industry Association vice president.