

Berliner, opponent look toward November battle in County Council District 1 race

Republicans aim for high turnout in general election

by Alex Ruoff | Staff Writer

Even among a throng of supporters, celebrating a landslide primary win, Roger Berliner was quick to acknowledge his seat on the Montgomery County Council is not yet secure.

"Always take nothing for granted in the general [election]," Berliner said the day after the Sept. 14 primary. "Especially this year."

Berliner, a Potomac energy lawyer, is the first Democrat to hold the District 1 seat, which includes Bethesda, Cabin John, Chevy Chase, Garrett Park, Glen Echo, Friendship Heights, North Bethesda, Potomac, Randolph Hills and Somerset. He unseated republican Howard Denis in 2006, the last year the GOP was represented on the county council.

Denis replaced fellow Republican leader Betty Ann Krahnke of Chevy Chase, who resigned from the council in 2000 citing health issues. Krahnke was elected when the council was expanded from seven to nine seats and divided into five district seats and four at-large seats.

The unofficial total showed Berliner finishing this year's primary with more than 75 percent of the vote, tallying 14,801 votes compared to challenger Ilaya Hopkins' 4,810.

Berliner's next opponent, Republican candidate Rob Vricella, said he poses a very different challenge to his seat.

"If you listened to what they were saying, there wasn't much difference between Berliner and [Hopkins]; it was all based on personality," said Vricella, who recorded 3,908 votes in the primary. "I'm here to say I represent a change from the status quo."

While the Berliner-Hopkins race was focused almost entirely on budgetary issues related to education, public transit, and other government services — where the two did not always fundamentally disagree — Vricella said he would like to draw a defined line between himself and the incumbent.

While Berliner touts his proposed energy tax on businesses and cuts in county spending, reporting a 4.5 percent drop in spending from fiscal 2010 to 2011, and a plan to create a government streamlining team known as the Organized Reform Commission, Vricella said he's campaigning on a platform of larger, more dramatic budget cuts including hard-line reductions in education spending.

"We need to prune back county government, everywhere," he said. "I'm not going support this bloated administration."

Montgomery County Republican Party Chairman Mark Uncapher said both District 1 and District 2 — where incumbent endorsed Craig Rice took home a victory in a five candidate Democratic primary and faces Republican Robin Ficker, who posted similar support in the primary despite running unopposed — represent opportunities for Republican candidates in Montgomery County.

"The economic issues, the budget issues, the future of the county is very important this year and it's unquestionably, given the frustration of the voters, a chance for strong candidates supporting a change of direction," he said.

The general election is Nov. 2.