

Ehrlich takes unpopular positions on key Montgomery County issues

Some question whether Republican gubernatorial candidate is undoing earlier emphasis

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is risking Montgomery County votes by opposing the popular Purple Line project and, more recently, supporting an education funding formula that would cost the county millions, political observers say.

While Ehrlich (R) made an early push for Montgomery County votes — launching his campaign in Rockville and putting Potomac resident Mary Kane on the ticket — some now question whether he has given up on voters in the state's most populous jurisdiction.

"Ehrlich's positions on the Purple Line and school funding are totally inconsistent with a decision to try to get a lot of votes out of Montgomery County," said Donald F. Norris, chairman of the Department of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Ehrlich's campaign denies the assertions, saying Ehrlich is working to reach voters in all districts. However, Ehrlich conceded to The Gazette editorial board recently that the Nov. 2 gubernatorial contest against Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) would be won or lost in the Baltimore suburbs.

"I think [Ehrlich has] given up on Montgomery County," said House Majority Leader Del. Kumar P. Barve (D-Dist. 17) of Gaithersburg. "I think he's looked at the numbers, and from a political standpoint giving up on Montgomery County is probably a smart move for him."

In 2006, O'Malley received 62 percent of the votes in Montgomery County, while Ehrlich got 36 percent.

Barve said Ehrlich has taken unpopular positions on two issues that matter most to his constituents: schools and transportation.

Ehrlich favors Bus Rapid Transit rather than light rail for a proposed Purple Line, a 16-mile stretch that would link Bethesda to New Carrollton.

And recently, Ehrlich proposed eliminating the state's Geographic Cost of Education Index, a \$126 million fund that provides aid for areas with high costs of living, such as Montgomery and Prince George's counties and Baltimore city.

Ehrlich's statements prompted O'Malley's campaign to organize an Oct. 6 news conference opposing the change, which would cost Montgomery County \$31 million.

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and Rushern L. Baker III (D), the presumptive next Prince George's County executive, spoke during the event. Leggett called Ehrlich's stance unacceptable.

"Some of those positions are controversial, but [Ehrlich] believes in telling people the truth about what we can and cannot do," said Ehrlich spokesman Andy Barth.

Barth said that with limited funding, Bus Rapid Transit is a less-costly option than the Purple Line. The light rail's construction costs are estimated at \$1.68 billion, and Barth says that a bus system would cost roughly one-third as much.

As for education funding, Ehrlich's campaign released a statement touting his commitment to education funding while he served as governor from 2003 to 2007.

Keith G. Haller, president of Potomac Inc., a Bethesda polling firm, said he is puzzled by Ehrlich's position on the Purple Line, given his focus on Montgomery County voters.

Haller says the Purple Line is supported by the business, environmental and labor communities, along with transit devotees and others. Ehrlich has strongly courted the votes of the business community.

"The Purple Line is a very, very popular issue in both Montgomery County and Prince George's County," Haller said. "It's a top-of-mind public policy issue."

However, Ehrlich's rapid bus proposal is supported by some Montgomery County residents who fear a light rail would harm the Capital Crescent Trail.

Baltimore suburbs

Given his recent policy positions, it's possible that Ehrlich never was focused on Montgomery County, Norris said. Some are speculating that Ehrlich's initial emphasis on Montgomery County might have been a ruse to get the O'Malley campaign to spend more time and resources there than was necessary, Norris said.

But he also has heard that Ehrlich's focus on Montgomery County was real. "I don't know which is true," Norris said.

Either way, he said, both candidates should be focused on Baltimore County. "For quite some time, Baltimore County has really been the key jurisdiction," he said.

Norris predicts Ehrlich will win Baltimore County in November, but not by enough to carry him to election.

"He will do better than four years ago, but not by enough," Norris said.

Republicans disagree

Some Republicans don't agree that Ehrlich's positions on key Montgomery County issues are at odds with voters.

Mark Uncapher, chairman of the county's Republican Party, said Ehrlich's position on the Purple Line is actually pro-transit.

"What Ehrlich has been promoting is the most practical approach to getting a transit project," Uncapher said. "It's a very pro-Montgomery County, pro-mass transit point of view."

Uncapher said Ehrlich has support in the county and predicts that the votes he receives in Montgomery County will make him competitive in the statewide race.

Robin Ficker, a former state delegate and current Republican candidate for Montgomery County Council in District 2, said Ehrlich's support for repealing an increase of the state's sales tax will resonate more with voters than his position on the Purple Line.

Ehrlich has said that if elected he will work to immediately repeal an increase of the sales tax from 5 cents to 6 cents that took place during the O'Malley administration.

Ficker, who supports the repeal, said the increase hurt economic development in Montgomery County.

Robert Smith, a Republican candidate for state Senate in District 39, said he also has found that voters are less interested in the Purple Line and more focused on the economy and job creation.

"I don't have people saying to me, 'You have to build the Purple Line. You have to do that now,'" said Smith, a longtime supporter of the transit project.

Early voting for the Nov. 2 general election will start Friday and run through Thursday, Oct. 28, except for Sunday. The polls will be open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The five early voting centers in Montgomery County are:

-Bauer Drive Community Recreation Center, 14625 Bauer Drive, Rockville

-Germantown Recreation Center, 18905 Kingsview Road, Germantown

-Marilyn J. Praisner Community Recreation Center, 14906 Old Columbia Pike,
Burtonsville

-Montgomery County Executive Office Building, 101 Monroe St., Rockville

-Silver Spring Civic Building, 8525 Fenton St., Silver Spring

ecunningham@gazette.net

Staff Writers Jeff Newman and Daniel Valentine contributed to this report