

New County Council Swears In

Budget problems dominate in inauguration festivities

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ROCKVILLE – The usual bells and whistles were absent Monday during the swearing-in of Montgomery County's elected leaders at Rockville High School.

Compared to the 2006 celebration at Strathmore Music Hall, which cost the county \$100,000, the modest \$5,000 celebration should reflect the county's budgetary predicament, according to Joseph Beach, who heads the county's Office of Management and Budget. Even County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett's (D) second-term inauguration speech grimly outlined the national economic crisis and the county's \$300 million budget shortfall projected for fiscal year 2012.

"Some of those living close to the edge slipped over, while others moved nearer to that line," Leggett said. "There were dreams deferred and lost – if our county has been spared the worst of these challenges, you know we have not been spared altogether."

Though the inauguration was so heavily attended that it required buses to shuttle attendees from remote parking lots, the county stuck to its meek budget by adorning the high school auditorium with a few potted flowers and by printing simple programs. The council's two new members, Craig Rice (D-Dist. 2) and Hans Riemer (D-At large), were not given welcome gifts, as is customary for new council members.

Rice and Riemer haven't been doing much celebrating since their decisive victories in November. In fact, they have been receiving regular council briefings for the past two weeks in preparation to take office. On their first day in office, the new council members began deliberations on where to cut \$36 million from the budget to make up for mid-year budget shortfalls.

"It's going to be a difficult time for the county," Rice said, acknowledging the uncertain times in which he took county office.

"I've got my feet firmly planted on the ground," said Riemer, who beat out former councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg for an at-large position.

Rice snagged the District 2 seat after former councilman Mike Knapp stepped down. Riemer and Rice join seven remaining council members: Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1), Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3), Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4), outgoing council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5), Marc Elrich (D-At large), George Leventhal (D-At large) and outgoing council President Nancy Floreen (D-At large). The outgoing president's speech was one of the few that did not focus on the budget but instead discussed the lack of diversity in the county's leadership positions.

"It has been said that if you are not at the table, then you are on the menu," Floreen said. "We must think beyond the table and those savvy enough to find a chair – we must remember that our service for the common good includes taking into account the needs of those who are not at the table."

The day following the inauguration, Ervin was voted into the position of president by her fellow council members. Ervin's election to the presidency follows a traditional route for county council, though she obtained her vice presidency last December following an unusual election. In an unexpected 5-4 vote in 2009, Floreen was elected to the presidency over Berliner, who was vice president at the time. Such a vote has only been done three times in the council's history.

"This year, I propose that we get back to basics, focus on disciplined governing and implement long-term structural changes in the interest of our community," Ervin said following her presidential election. "The challenges that we will face during the upcoming year are squarely focused on pocket-book economics, and we will devote our time to maintaining the quality of life in Montgomery County."

This time, Berliner nominated Ervin for president and the council voted her unanimously into the position. Berliner was voted in as vice president for the second time in three years. Last week Berliner joked that he certainly had the "experience" for the office.