

Montgomery neighborhood could have a powerful grip on county council

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Montgomery County stretches across a diverse terrain of more than 495 square miles. But if political wisdom in the heavily Democratic county holds, four of nine County Council members will live within three miles of one another by year's end.

Three council members already do, right along the Takoma Park-Silver Spring border.

Hans Riemer, a Silver Spring political organizer, joined three neighborhood incumbents in winning Democratic nominations in Tuesday's primary. If the four are victorious come November -- as many assume they will be in a county where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than 2 to 1 -- their tree-lined patch of Montgomery north of the District line will deepen its remarkable grip on local government power.

It would be as if 193 of the House of Representatives' 435 members lived in an area smaller than Connecticut, prompting some in Montgomery to raise questions about fairness and the appearance of favoritism. The area is home to District 5 council member Valerie Ervin and two at-large incumbents, George Leventhal and Marc Elrich, who won countywide primaries Tuesday. Riemer also ran countywide.

But Leventhal, a former legislative director for Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) and a Takoma Park resident for a quarter-century, said he has put major miles on his Mercury Mariner hybrid working for constituents and campaigning across Montgomery.

"If the voters countywide felt they wanted a different mix of residencies for the at-large members, they had the opportunity to cast their votes as they saw fit," Leventhal said. "Nobody forced them to choose three guys from the same neighborhood."

On one end of Montgomery's equivalent to Pennsylvania Avenue is Leventhal's midsize home with a fenced yard and a blue-and-white campaign sign out front. On the other end is a two-story brick home across from Sligo Creek Elementary School where Ervin, a former member of the Board of Education, lives. At-Large incumbent Elrich and newcomer Riemer live on side streets along the way.

On a three-mile walk start to finish through the quartet's base Thursday, few of those headed home from the Takoma Metro station or watching a football practice from the sidelines knew they were in the midst of such a concentration of county authority. And some didn't much care.

"I have no expectations. Let's put it that way," said Glenn Trivers, a postal carrier watching a helmeted group of kids tackle a yellow dummy at Takoma Park Middle School on Piney Branch Road not far from Leventhal's home. Trivers was among about 20 percent of Montgomery voters who turned out Tuesday. He said he voted for Gov.

Martin O'Malley and a school board member whose name sounded familiar but couldn't remember whether he selected any of the council candidates.

But head further along Piney Branch and make a left at the large potholes on the way toward Riemer's house, and there was some recognition of the benefits of living in Montgomery's local corridor of power.

"It's knowing these folks. They live where you live. They understand what issues you have," said Ed Bordley, a federal government lawyer. "You run into them every day, and you feel like you can say, 'How about this issue? What about getting a light down here at the school so the kids can cross Piney Branch Road safely?' "

Bordley, who is blind and was walking home with his German shepherd guide dog, Kaleb, said he loves the location not far from Metro, the tomatoes from his neighbors and the nearby church that serves as his faith-based hub of activism on social issues, which includes promoting affordable housing. And he thinks the nature of the community is such that it wouldn't abuse its outsized influence. "I'd like to think we have the interests of the rest of the county at heart," Bordley said.

But some from elsewhere in Montgomery would prefer a little more geographic power sharing.

"It gives that area a very, very strong voice on the county council," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg/Rockville).

The political culture of activism in the Takoma Park-Silver Spring area helped the four ride to victory Tuesday, despite the changing trend of where people are living in Montgomery. The county's population center has been creeping northward each decade since 1960 and was in Rockville in 2000, according to county officials.

Several years ago, Andrews pressed the case for getting rid of at-large districts altogether and dividing the county into nine districts instead. Voters rejected that in a 2004 referendum.

"A countywide district is huge. It's 1 1/2 times the size of a congressional district, and it's larger than several states" in population, Andrews said, adding that officials would be "closer to the people" with smaller districts. "It's very hard for people who aren't able to raise a lot of money to break into a countywide race."

Even primary winner Ervin questions the wisdom of the clustering of officialdom. As a strong and early supporter of Riemer, she's partly responsible. But she's had concerns about the appearance and reality of the situation.

"I really think the best way to govern the county is to have representatives from all the different areas of the county. It's a 500-square-mile jurisdiction," Ervin said. "I don't

think it's necessarily a great idea to have so many members of the County Council living in one area. People may feel that area will get special attention."

As the council member for District 5, which covers Silver Spring and Takoma Park, Ervin said she's experienced firsthand the confusion of having so much representing going on in one place. It took a while for her, Elrich and Leventhal to stop running into one another, she said. "It got really messy there for a while. Things would happen, and I wouldn't know about it. People would get confused in the community: 'Who do I call? I've got George, I've got Marc, I've got Valerie, and now I've got Hans,' " Ervin said.

It's Montgomery's hybrid political system and a good-government appeal that allowed this to happen.

Instead of having only district council members, as in Prince George's County, or district supervisors and a countywide board chairman, as in Fairfax County, Montgomery reserves four at-large seats under the theory that doing so is a good way to keep a focus on the long view.

The current system shapes the tone of debate on difficult issues, such as where to place so-called LULUs, or locally unpopular land uses, said Royce Hanson, the former county planning chairman who lost his council bid Tuesday.

"The district representative knows they are working in a context in which the district view has to adapt to countywide concerns and countywide interests," said Hanson, who has argued against moves to only have district representatives in Montgomery. Such an arrangement would make people "take too parochial a view of things," Hanson said.

Council member Andrews rejected that argument. It hasn't proved true in Fairfax, he said. And by Hanson's logic, Maryland's delegates, senators and congressional representatives should run at-large statewide, Andrews said.

Hanson had another point. Under today's system, each voter can cast ballots for the majority of council members. That's great if you don't like your council member, he said.

"If you're represented by only one person, where do you go?" Hanson asked. "If you've got a district representative, and you've got four at-large representatives, you've got five avenues to try to influence policy instead of just one."