

# Montgomery activist proposes term limits for county officials

**By Michael Laris**  
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A Republican activist who surprised Montgomery County's political establishment two years ago with a successful referendum making property taxes harder to increase has revived another idea he hopes will shake up local politicians: term limits.

Robin Ficker, a GOP candidate for the County Council, submitted a stack of 16,000 signatures Monday to Montgomery officials to get a question on the ballot in November that would add term limits to the county's charter. If 10,000 are certified, his measure will go to voters.

Ficker tried this in 2000 and 2004, but voters narrowly rejected term limits both times. But he's come up with a looser proposal that he thinks will mesh with the anti-incumbent electoral mood that he says he has detected in months of signature-gathering at supermarkets across the county.

The limits would kick in after three consecutive terms -- not two, as with many such efforts, including his first -- and they would not take effect until 2014. The rule would cover the county executive and the county's nine council members.

The proposal is one of two referendums that could be put before Montgomery voters in November if enough signatures are validated. Volunteer firefighters are seeking to repeal a new law authorizing an ambulance fee in Montgomery. Opponents of the fee argue that it could undermine the volunteer system.

Under a separate set of referendum rules for repealing laws passed by the council, fee opponents need 30,733 signatures, electoral officials said. They've already turned in 31,777, officials said, and are continuing to gather new names before a deadline this month.

On term limits, Ficker is projecting confidence, although some officials said that many of his efforts have failed in the past. Of course, their dismissals have been wrong before -- his 2008 ballot question making it tougher to pass property tax increases passed despite widespread opposition among officials.

This time, "the reception has been very favorable, because people think we need fresh ideas in the county government," Ficker said. "If you can't get it done in 12 years, you're not going to get it done. Right now they can serve forever. They can serve as long as Robert Byrd."

Byrd, a Democrat, represented West Virginia in the Senate for more than a half a century before he died in June at 92. There's no one of remotely comparable political longevity in Montgomery, but three council members would be affected, if they win reelection and want another term. The limits would cover those "who will have served three or more consecutive terms at noon on the first Monday of December 2014."

Council President Nancy Floreen (At Large) is seeking the Democratic nomination to run for a third term in November, as is council member George L. Leventhal (At Large). Council member Phil Andrews (D-Rockville-Gaithersburg) has no primary and is running for a fourth term in November.

"In Montgomery County, incumbency is no guarantee of a continued ability to stay in office. Our residents judge us pretty thoroughly," Floreen said. "I'm not afraid of my record. But to just say you need new people every four years, just because, doesn't mean you've solved the problem. You may have other problems."

Purging expertise is one, Floreen said, adding that term limits deter "a long-term commitment to thinking about the future. If you're not there to be responsible for it, why would you care?"

"It takes away voter choice, it penalizes experience, and it addresses a nonexistent problem," Andrews said.

Leventhal said he has not considered electoral plans past the Sept. 14 primary and declined to offer his views on term limits.

"We have smart voters in Montgomery County. They will make their own decision. They don't need my guidance," he said.

Two of Ficker's potential Democratic opponents for the Upcounty council seat in November, former county planning chairman Royce Hanson and Del. Craig L. Rice, said they oppose term limits.

The ongoing struggle over the ambulance fee has extended what has been an ugly budget season. County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has argued that overturning the fee, which he has championed for years and which passed the council in May, would strip away needed funds.

In a recent letter to the council, Leggett wrote that the fee "will fund critically needed services and would bring in \$14 million a year -- and \$200 million over 10 years -- in revenue from monies already set aside by private insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid. County residents with health insurance will pay nothing -- no co-pays, no deductibles, nothing." He added that county residents without insurance also pay nothing.

Should the referendum make the ballot, Leggett said that he would ask budget officials to find \$14 million in budget cuts as soon as possible, and that those "will certainly hit public safety, including our fire and rescue services."

Leggett also said that controversial employee furloughs to save about \$10 million were "proving challenging to our delivery of services."

"I think it's a transparent attempt to scare people," said Andrews, who opposes the fee.

Eric N. Bernard, executive director of the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire-Rescue Association, contends that the fee will cause some people to hesitate to call 911; fee supporters say that has not happened elsewhere.

Bernard's objection also is philosophical.

"Much of the service, at least 40 percent, is provided by volunteers who don't get paid. It's wrong to be collecting revenue from volunteer service," he said. The fee could also discourage donations, he said.