

# The activist city that didn't vote

## Will there ever be enough candidates in a Takoma Park election trigger Instant Run-off Voting?

BY TAMRA TOMLINSON

In a city that took the audacious steps of declaring itself a "nuclear-free zone" and passing a resolution in support of the impeachment of President Bush and Vice President Cheney, it seems that political engagement would be a way of life.

But election records provided by the City Clerk's office reveal that Takoma Park residents seem to find "outside" politics quite a bit more engaging than what goes on here in town. The November 6 municipal elections generated the lowest voter turnout in 12 years.

Only 931 ballots were cast for an uncontested race for the office of mayor, won by former Ward Three Councilmember Bruce Williams, with 101 of those going to an array of 55 write-in candidates. Among these were Ho Chi Minh, Comedy Central show host Stephen Colbert and "Mickey Mouse." Former Mayor Kathy Porter received two write-in votes, as did "Anybody Else."

In Ward Three - the ward with the highest turnout, and the only one in which more than one candidate was on the ballot - 357 votes were cast, giving Dan Robinson a 235-to-112 edge over Bridget Bowers. At the low end, only 47 ballots were cast for the Ward Six council seat.

"These municipal elections don't get the attention that the presidential or state elections do," said City Clerk Jessie Carpenter. "It's tough to get people to turn out for municipal elections. A contested

mayor's race would definitely bring people out."

In 1995, the year in which the referendum on city unification was on the ballot, 32 percent of registered voters in Takoma Park went to the polls. In 1997, participation fell to 27 percent. It fell even further, to only 18 percent, in 1999. Participation rebounded in 2001 to 24 percent, when there was a seriously contested mayor's race, but plummeted to 15 percent in 2003 when Porter was unopposed for mayor. In 2005, when she again had a strong challenger, 25 percent of registered voters made a trip to the polls.

If disinterest in voting is connected to a dearth of choices, why are there so few candidates?

Ward Five Councilmember Reuben Snipper, who ran unopposed, said that some of the best potential candidates for municipal office are often those least able to run. Parents with children in local schools or members of households with two wage-earners are less likely to be able to devote the time that public service requires, he said, even though they often have a high stake in community affairs.

Younger people with no children, on the other hand, are likely to have more free time and fewer financial obligations, but they are more transient and are less invested in the community.

"It takes a lot of time, and the pay doesn't go very far," Snipper said. "You're going to be away from your family two or three nights a week. There are lots of

e-mails and letters. It discourages people from running."

Seth Grimes, president of the Old Town Residents' Association, said that concerns about schools, crime and development are among the local topics that tend to dominate local political conversations, but those matters are rarely at issue in city elections. The state and county have the most power and influence development and schools, and no single member of the Council can do much to affect changes in crime rates.

"In addition to that, the City holds elections on off years," Grimes said. "The turnout would be higher, quite frankly, if we were on the same cycle as the state and national elections."

An important issue that is truly local but generates little attention, Grimes said, is that of tax duplication. The city receives an unsatisfactory rebate from Montgomery County for services like police and trash collection which are provided by the city, according to Grimes.

"But it's been a real slog to get that issue on the front burner," he said. "People don't find it engaging because it's technical and involves formulas and discussions about costs. People only get excited about taxation when they get their property tax bill. They're upset for a few weeks, then they move back to thinking about everyday life."

Dennis Lucarelli, newly elected president of the South of Sligo Citizens' Association, a community organization in

Ward Two, has heard the topic of the tax rebates come up in his neighborhood.

"Takoma Park has a strange relationship with the county, and how we're reimbursed. We're always on the losing end of that deal," he said. But Lucarelli didn't vote in this year's elections in which Ward Two Councilmember Colleen Clay was running unopposed. "It's hard to rally around an election in which it doesn't matter how you vote," he said.

Lucarelli noted that the rate at which residents decline to participate might be a sort of protest. "My sense is that there's some kind of residual fallout from ill feelings about the cost of the new municipal building and the lack of a gym," he said.

The fact that much of the authority over Takoma Park's government rests with the city manager and not the City Council also discourages voting, he said. "The people on the Council are really important in the community, but they're not professional administrators. Even the mayor's job is only part-time."

Grimes suggested that civic participation is a case of city residents making choices about where to invest most of their political energy. "People in Takoma Park are extremely active in national, international and state politics," he said. "They are very outward-looking and involved in issues like the Iraq moratorium, energy and global warming. Global warming is more important than run-of-the-mill city issues, and people are captivated by that."

## ISO Republicans

### Takoma Park lacks non-Democratic judges for 2008 elections

BY JANELLE LILLEY

There is a critical shortage of Republicans, Independents and Green Party members in Takoma Park. At least, that is what the Montgomery County Board of Elections said recently in a letter sent to voters registered to those parties.

City Council member Terry Seamens was initially amused by the letter, which said, "The [lack of Republicans] is especially dire in Takoma Park." Seamens, however, recognizes that, because Montgomery County is overwhelmingly Democratic, the board of elections is having trouble finding enough non-Democratic registered voters to serve as election judges.

The problem was made greater by the Maryland legislature's decision to move this year's primaries to February 12 when the retirees, who make up the majority of

election judges, are more likely to be on winter sabbaticals in warmer climates. Marjorie Roher, a spokeswoman for the Montgomery County Board of Elections, said that local February weather also could make it more difficult for non-Democratic election judges to travel from elsewhere in Montgomery County to precincts in Takoma Park and Silver Spring.

"Our best chance to staff a polling place, in case of bad weather, is to get people who live one or two miles away," Roher said.

There must be an equal number of Democrats and non-Democrats serving as election judges at each polling place. "If the only election judges are Democrats, it would raise the question of a biased election," Seamens said.

Roher estimates that more than 1,500 additional volunteers are needed for the February primary.

## Activists take polar plunge to fight global warming

BY JANELLE LILLEY

Winter is here, and so far the weather has been mild (some might even call it warm). But, is it warm enough to take a dip in the Chesapeake? The Chesapeake Climate Action Network thinks so.

On December 8, about 500 people are expected to gather in Annapolis in an effort to heighten awareness of and raise money to fight global warming. About half the people attending the event will brave the cold waters and take the third annual Polar Bear Plunge.

"Think of it as a walk-a-thon for global warming, just shorter and colder," said Gordan Clark, the event's organizer. The Chesapeake Climate Action Network was the first to do a polar bear plunge. Now, 40 other groups across the country have adopted the model and will be participating in the plunge on December

8, the International Day of Climate Action.

This year's plunge is expected to draw the largest crowd to date. Clark partially attributes the event's growth to an increase in public awareness of global warming. "People are seeing it more and more; you just can't miss it...not just on TV but people see it in the weather around them," Clark said.

Clark said money raised from the event will go toward causes like fighting the construction of coal fire plants in Virginia and getting a clean car bill passed in Washington.

Heated tents, hot chocolate and donuts will be provided at the event, but Clark said after taking the plunge, most participants are simply happy with the warm glow they get from knowing they did something to fight global warming.

