



News ▾

Sports ▾

Schools ▾

The County Line ▾

Opinion ▾

Faith ▾

Health ▾

Entertainment ▾

Homes ▾

County Budget Stories ▾

Cappies -- High School Theater ▾

Newcomers' Guide ▾

Alternative Education ▾

Pain Doctor's Trial ▾

Senior Send-Off ▾

101 Ways to Have Fun ▾

Alexandria Gazette Packet ▾

Arlington Connection ▾

Burke Connection ▾

Centre View ▾

Election Guide 2005 ▾

Fairfax Connection ▾

Fairfax Station-Clifton ▾

Great Falls Connection ▾

Herndon Connection ▾

Laurel Hill Connection ▾

Loudoun Connection ▾

McLean Connection ▾

Mount Vernon Gazette ▾

Potomac Almanac ▾

Reston Connection ▾

Springfield Connection ▾

Vienna/Oakton Connection ▾

No Surprises in Election

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May 15, 2002

When the polls closed on the Vienna Town Council elections last Tuesday, no one was surprised by the results.

None of the four candidates won by a landslide. There were no dark horse candidates, who defied expectations and came out on top. Simply put, there was no voting-day excitement in this year's council race.

Why no excitement?
Because there was no race to speak of.

Every candidate was uncontested this year. There were three seats open on the town council, and there were three candidates – newcomers Edythe Kelleher and Laurie Cole, and incumbent Albert Boudreau. In the mayoral race incumbent Jane Seeman was the only option.

Given that there was no competition in this year's race, turnout was not expected to be high. Of the 10,240 registered voters in town just 978, 9.6 percent, came out to vote. And although the numbers were low, some council members said turnout was higher than expected.

"For the fact that there was no contest, there was a pretty darn good turnout," said council member Maud Robinson.

Robinson observed the voters on election day and said that, as happens every year, there was a large contingent of older voters. But, encouragingly, she noticed an influx of younger voters as well.

"Older members of the community have more of a sense of the privilege it is to vote, and they do it whether the election is contested or not," Robinson said. "But there was an unusual turnout of younger voters, and I don't mean teenagers, but young parents. I thought it was very nice to see."

Robinson said the younger voters may have been the product of a renewed patriotic spirit following Sept. 11. She said the campaigning efforts of the two younger council candidates – Edythe Kelleher and Laurie Cole – may have also had an impact.

"A lot of people I spoke with while I was campaigning said, 'You're all sure to win, so what's the point?'" Cole said. "You try to appeal to their civic duty, tell them they should vote just to vote, but that's not as good a motivation as a contested election."

Cole and Kelleher will be the first two new council members elected onto the board since 1997, when Robert McCormick was voted onto the council in another uncontested election. The rest of the council members have been appointed, at one time or another, by whatever council members were in power. After being appointed, the council members have retained their seats, being re-elected every two years as incumbents. Cole and Kelleher will take the place of council members Robert McCormick and Steven Briglia. McCormick announced his resignation from council months in advance of the election, but Briglia dropped out midway into the council race so he could take over as town attorney.

IN HIS FIVE YEARS on the town council McCormick said he has not been as effective as he had hoped. He said there are many areas in which the town should be more "forward thinking." One of those areas is the Vienna Volunteer Fire Department, which needs \$2 million for renovations, McCormick said. The town donated just \$10,000 toward the fire department in this year's budget. McCormick said the town should also be trying to bring a wider variety of businesses to the town. He noted that there are few night spots, and no theaters in town.

"Nothing against the town council, but stagnancy occurs anytime you have the same people in any position for a long time," McCormick said. "The question is whether the new blood [Cole and Kelleher] will be allowed to be represented. In this case, I don't know what will happen. I sincerely hope the two new people are more of an influence on the council than I have been."

McCormick has suggested imposing term limits on Vienna Council members, but other council members have not favored such action.

Robinson said it is not necessarily a bad thing to have long-standing board members on town council. She said that during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s there was much more turnover on council, with many more

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incumbents being unseated.

"We were growing and developing then," Robinson said. "More people were worried about where the town was going. Now that the town is on a steady course, there is not as much a sense of dissatisfaction."

Council member Vincent Olson agreed with Robinson. He said the council members that have been appointed have all been highly active in town affairs. And they have been re-elected, Olson said, because of their performance.

"I don't remember, up until the last few years, having so many uncontested elections," Olson said. "It says people are happy with the direction the town is going and the decisions the town is making."

But Cole said the situation on town council may be intimidating to new people interested in running for election. She pointed out that in recent years the new people elected onto council have been elected due to circumstance, after former council members have left the board for one reason or another.

"I wouldn't call it a problem," Cole said. "But it is a [perceived] problem. It sends the message to people who might be running that it is insurmountable [to defeat an incumbent]."

MOST LIKELY THERE would have been more voters in this year's election had Briglia stayed in the race, instead of taking the town attorney position, which opened up after John Gionfriddo suddenly announced his resignation. Had Briglia stayed in the race there would have been four candidates seeking the three open council seats.

Briglia, an attorney by trade, was appointed to the town position through a closed-session council vote. The town did not interview any other candidates before taking the vote. Every council member but McCormick voted in favor of the appointment. McCormick would have liked the town to interview additional candidates. "He was a well-qualified, excellent candidate," Olson said of Briglia. "We could have solicited bids, but with a candidate like Steve in-house, it would have been a waste of effort."

But Vienna resident Ed Turkaly said the council "stole the election" by appointing Briglia and, in effect, determining who would be winning the council race.

"They took one of their own council members and put them into the town attorney position," said Turkaly. "I don't think that was very ethical."

Turkaly ran for town council four years ago, mainly so that the race would be contested. He said everyone should try running for council at least once.

"It was fun," Turkaly said. "I didn't have an ego, so I didn't mind that I lost. But it's kind of your duty to get involved. I learned a lot about the town. It's tough though. Everybody's working, they're raising families, they've got the rat race all around."

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