

BUSINESS SEATS ON RCC'S BOARD?

By William Nicoson

The Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce has formally sought from the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors dedicated seats on the Board of Governors of the Reston Community Center in a number proportionate to the share of property taxes collected for RCC's benefit from Reston businesses.

The RCC board now consists of nine adult members and two youth members. Since the percentage of the RCC tax borne by businesses is currently about 43%, the Chamber's proposal would add 9 new members to the RCC board to be selected by the supervisors presumably upon recommendation of the Chamber board or of a Chamber-organized committee of all business entities owning real estate within the RCC district. Another solution involving reshuffling of existing seats would require the supervisors to ignore some of the uncontested winners of October's preference poll.

The Chamber's proposal has stirred a reaction in RCC supporters which is both skeptical and apprehensive. If, as expected, the business percentage of district taxes rises above the residential percentage, RCC would be controlled by Chamber-selected governors. In any case, some believe that the Chamber would use dedicated seats on the RCC board (whether or not a majority) to reduce taxes by cutting back on RCC programming with a view to eventually eliminating the tax district -- and RCC's existence -- altogether. In October the Chamber's board adopted a resolution urging a stand-still in RCC activities.

RCC champions point out that the property tax used to fund RCC is a mere 5.2 cents per \$100 valuation while the property tax collected to fund the County is \$1.21 per \$100, or more than 23 times the funding for RCC. They wonder why the Chamber hasn't asked for dedicated seats on the Board of Supervisors where the big tax dollars are spent.

The answer is of course that only people are entitled to vote for candidates seeking public office. Employees and executives of businesses may vote but not corporations and other business entities. Generally, the business community influences public decisions by advocacy and lobbying rather than voting.

And, of course, business employees and executives may also run for office. At least two members of the current RCC board are members of the Chamber.

Former Chamber President Tom D'Alesandro points to the Route 28 Highway Transportation Improvement District as precedent for voting by businesses owning taxed real estate to elect a district advisory board. If businesses have voting rights in one county tax district, he asks, why not in RCC's tax district?

Reston businesses have equity on their side. Their dollars account for nearly half of RCC's tax revenue. They deserve a commensurate share in RCC governance. There will be a lot of pulling and hauling and a lot of lawyering to achieve that result. But the Supervisors, the Chamber and the existing RCC board have it in their power to bring more equitable governance to RCC.

Reston businesses also have RCC on their side. RCC contributes substantially to Reston's positive business environment. RCC's offerings facilitate employee hiring and contribute to employee satisfaction. I once asked Phil Odeen, CEO of TRW, why he decided to move his business (then BDM) to Reston. Among his reasons were the amenities of community life. RCC and its programs are fundamental to the superlative community image enjoyed by Reston.

I can't believe savvy Reston business leaders want voting rights in order to do away with RCC.

William Nicoson is a member of the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce and president of Planned Community Archives, Inc., headquartered at George Mason University.