

City Council Considers Changing Vacancy Process

by Shernay Williams, *The Afro-American*, February 2, 2011

Three weeks after their contentious appointment of William “Pete” Welch to his mother’s vacated ninth district seat, city council members are proposing changes to the vacancy filling process.

Council President Bernard C. “Jack” Young and Councilman William H. Cole have introduced a rule change that would require 11 residents of the vacated district to serve on the council’s vacancy nominating committee.

Of those non-elected officials, seven would be representatives from the area’s community associations, two from faith-based organizations and two more from business establishments. Two city council persons from abutting districts would also serve on the panel.

During his introduction of the proposal this week, Young said, “We want to change the way we do business and show we are transparent.”

“After the experience filling Agnes Welch’s vacant seat, we heard from constituents who felt they weren’t a part of the process,” he told the *AFRO* after the introduction, “and we felt the community should have a greater role.”

In a 10-3 vote, council members selected Welch to complete the remainder of his mother’s city council term after her abrupt retirement late last year. The decision and entire process, which placed the appointment entirely in the hands of the council, stirred a public outcry.

Under the proposed rule changes, the standing city council president would choose residents for the nomination panel within one week of the vacancy. Representatives would be selected from city planning’s list of active community and improvement groups.

Cole, who visibly hesitated before voting for Welch during the ninth district vacancy filling, said, “We relied on letters of support in making our decision but the process was imperfect and awkward.”

Before the city leaders could vote to adopt the changes, Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke moved that the council hold a public hearing prior to the vote. “If we are going to change the rules, everyone should have a chance to look at the rules. I think we should at least offer people a chance to testify,” said Clarke, who did not vote for Welch during the ninth district’s vacancy. The rest of the council agreed. City officials said the hearing will be scheduled in coming weeks.

Community leader Marvin ‘Doc’ Cheatham, who expressed concerns about the city council vacancy filling procedures during Welch’s appointment, said he is generally satisfied with the proposal but has one concern.

“They should not have the authorization to turn down (the vacancy panel’s nominee) and pick someone else,” he said. “I’m pleased as long as the language is changed so that the council cannot circumvent the panel’s decision.”

The council’s newest member says the vacancy filling process should be even more inclusive than proposed changes. “I hope we amend the rules at the state level involving special elections,” Welch said. This way, he continued, all residents in the vacated district can vote for candidates using library computers, or Facebook.”

Councilman Bill Henry is attempting to revive a similar elections measure. But unlike surrounding counties, the Baltimore City Council must get approval from the state before administering special elections.

Cole said the special elections option would be beneficial, but is not a guarantee. “The only thing we can control is our vacancy selection process,” he said.