

## **Under proposal, community panel to choose City Council members**

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, January 31, 2011

In the wake of the controversial appointment of the son of a longtime Baltimore city councilwoman to fill his mother's seat, council members have proposed drafting a panel of residents to choose candidates for empty seats.

Under a proposal by Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young and Councilman William H. Cole IV, community association members and business leaders would join two council members from contiguous districts to nominate a candidate. Council members currently decide who will fill a vacant seat.

"We felt the fair process would be to get community leaders involved," said Young.

Community leaders expressed outrage last month when council members chose William A. "Pete" Welch Jr. to replace his mother, Agnes Welch, following her retirement after nearly three decades representing West Baltimore.

Welch, who had worked as an aide to his mother for her entire tenure, pleaded guilty to second-degree assault and handgun violations in 2000 after he fired a handgun near a woman demanding payment for campaigning for his mother.

Welch, a certified public accountant, also pleaded guilty in 2004 to three campaign finance violations after failing to file his mother's campaign finance reports.

Council members chose Welch by a 10-3 margin, bypassing a longtime community activist, a political science professor and a teacher who had applied for the seat.

Cole described the current process of choosing a replacement as "awkward."

"We heard from a lot of people who didn't like the process," he said.

Under the proposal, the council president would appoint eight board members from community groups in the district, three business leaders and two council members to a nominating committee to vet candidates. Council members will cast a final vote on the proposal next week.

A second proposal, introduced by Councilman Bill Henry, would ask the state legislature to allow the city to call a special election. Other jurisdictions are able to hold special elections, but a provision in the law prevents the city from doing so.

"Some expressed dissatisfaction with any kind of appointment process," said Henry, who, along with Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke and Councilman James B. Kraft, had voted against Welch.

Henry's bill received lukewarm support from council members, who voiced concerns about the state legislature tinkering with the city's election process.

Welch said he supported both proposals, but hoped that elections could one day be carried out on the social networking site Facebook.

"I hope that we can one day select a council person via Facebook, not just in special elections but in primary elections as well," said Welch. "I think that's where it's headed once you work out the security issues."