

Filling City Council vacancies

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When former Baltimore City Councilwoman Agnes Welch announced her retirement, there was little doubt about who would replace her — and thus have the advantage of incumbency in this fall's election. Her son and longtime aide, Pete Welch, was the frontrunner from the start, and nothing — not applications from other potential council members and not Mr. Welch's criminal record — changed that. The people who picked Mr. Welch were his mother's colleagues on the council, and in at least some cases, their support was payback for her votes over the years. Other than Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young, none of them represented the voters of Ms. Welch's district, giving them little knowledge of the issues there and no accountability for their choice.

Whether Mr. Welch will turn out to be a good representative for his district remains to be seen, but the verdict on the process by which he got there is clear: It stinks.

It's heartening, then, that council members are considering ways to reform the process. Councilman Bill Henry has the most straightforward proposal — creating the option for special elections — but it appears to have only tepid support. More likely to pass is a proposal by Mr. Young and Councilman William H. Cole IV to diminish the council's role in the selection process. Their idea, which was introduced as a council rule change Monday night and which could be adopted sometime this month, is a bit cumbersome and still doesn't guarantee that council insiders couldn't manipulate the process. But it's certainly an improvement.

Their idea is that whenever a vacancy occurs, the council president would assemble a committee to vet applications to fill the seat. Eight committee members would come from neighborhood associations in the district, three from business owners in the district and two would be council members from adjacent districts. That group would hold public interviews with the candidates and make a recommendation to the council, which would then have the final say.

Theoretically, the council president could stack the committee with his supporters and manipulate the process from behind the scenes, but it would be difficult to do so. The people on the committee would have to live with their choice and would have to return to their communities and answer for it. The only exception would be the two council members on the committee. Mr. Cole said he thought it was important to include them so that some members of the committee have experience in what a council member's job actually entails. That's reasonable.

Nonetheless, the proposal still amounts to a small group of people making a decision on behalf of an entire district. The only way to get around that would be to hold a special election, and Messrs. Young and Cole have dismissed that idea as impractical and expensive. Changing the law to allow for special elections would actually require action by the General Assembly. Special elections would require the schools, community

centers and other sites for polling places to be closed down for another day, though only in one district, creating possible confusion. The exact cost of a special election in a Baltimore City Council district is unknown because it has never happened before. A citywide election costs about \$2 million, and Mr. Cole said estimates for a single-district election run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. All that trouble might not have made much sense in the case of Ms. Welch's council seat, since a special election would have come only a few months before the next regular election.

Still, the council shouldn't give up on Mr. Henry's idea of special elections so easily. Some Maryland jurisdictions — notably, Montgomery and Prince George's counties — do hold special elections, and even at a time when the city is strapped for money, the expense of opening the polls in a district would not be too heavy a burden, since special elections, by their nature, aren't needed regularly. The council should adopt the proposal from Councilmen Young and Cole, as it is an improvement over the current process, but it should also embark on a more thorough review of how other jurisdictions handle vacancies and seek a more exact estimate of how costly a special election would be. Real democracy is expensive — but worth it.