

## City Council Moves Closer To Process For Filling Vacant Seats

By Matt Purdy, *WYPR – FM*, March 9, 2011

In early December, Agnes Welch retired after serving as Councilwoman of the 9th district for almost 30 years. In accordance with Baltimore City Council rules, a nominating committee formed consisting entirely of council members in order to find a replacement.

In early January, that committee – comprised of Welch’s former colleagues -- nominated Welch’s son, William Welch, to fill the seat. The process, according to Councilman William Cole representing the 11th district, was not ideal.

“You know, I sat there thinking there has got to be a better way to do this. This is just- putting it in our hands to make the final vote, fine. But, having us go through the process and make decisions about a replacement for a district that we don’t represent was awkward at best.”

And so, working with City Council President Bernard “Jack” Young, Councilman Cole proposed a new way of doing things. The City Council President informed the public yesterday at a hearing in City Hall, which was attended by one person.

“The rule change that we are discussing today puts part of the responsibility of nominating those candidates to the council in the hands of the community.”

This provoked vigorous debate about amending the proposal.

“I would like to suggest, I know this is an arbitrary number, but I would like to suggest that the number be 25, rather than 15...”

As it currently stands, freshly-amended by the City Council, this is how it would work: Within seven days after a vacancy occurs, the President of the Council would appoint a nominating committee consisting of no more than 25, but no less than 13 members. The committee would consist of two City Council members from districts abutting the vacated district, three representatives from local businesses or business organizations, and the rest would come from community association representatives in the district.

The nominating committee would hold public hearings and hold public interviews with potential nominees. After deliberation, a single nominee would be voted upon by the City Council. If they vote not to elect the nominee, the process would start over again.

Councilman Cole said the process would be transparent.

“All of this is done in public, the Open Meeting Act would apply, so they would have to have everything involved with this process done in public session that is announced and publicized. So, there isn’t any part of this that’s done behind closed doors.”

The current proposal could be no more than a temporary fix, according to Council President Young.

“As we move forward, this is the first step in a process that we hope that one day if there is a vacancy we can have a special election to solve this whole issue once and for all.”

That, however, is an issue that must be taken up with the General Assembly. Under current state law, Baltimore cannot call for special elections to replace a vacated council seat.

The City Council unanimously voted to pass the proposed rule change with amendments to the Council floor on Monday. The City Council is scheduled to vote on the proposal on March 21st. If the rule is changed, it would instantly take effect.