

WHAT DOES A CHARTER MEAN FOR YOU? By Orrie Eihacker, Charter Commission Member

Montgomery County does not currently have a charter. Montgomery County is organized under a structure that has been relatively unchanged since the 1700s. Out of the 65 counties in the state, only nine other counties use this structure. Because the responsibilities and expenses of running a county are vastly more complicated and higher than they were 200 years ago, our current form of government is no longer the most efficient way to meet these challenges.

A county charter sets up the basic structure and organization of county government. A charter allows for a clear separation between the legislative authority, that is, who sets the direction of the county, and the administrative authority, that is, who makes the day-to-day decisions on running the county. It allows for a more efficient operation than the current system.

The charter calls for an elected County Executive. The County Executive would be elected by the voters of the county as a whole to run the county. The County Executive would be in charge of day-to-day operations. He or she would appoint department heads, (subject to approval by the legislature) and oversee their operations. This would be a big change from the current system. Currently, the department heads have to answer to all 15 members of the Board of Supervisors, with the result that there can be conflicting input about the direction of each department. A County Executive would eliminate this inefficiency. The charter also calls for the County Executive to be the chief budget officer, with the assistance of an appointed Commissioner of Finance. The County Executive would be responsible for preparing and submitting the annual budget to a legislature, for their approval.

The charter also calls for a 9-member County Legislature. This would replace the 15 member Board of Supervisors. The Town Supervisors who currently sit on the Board of Supervisors would continue to be Town Supervisors. They would no longer have to do

double duty and could more fully concentrate on their town duties. The County legislators would be elected only to serve on the County Legislature. Their only job would be to run the county and to solve problems that affect the county as a whole. This would eliminate any potential conflict between town interests and the interests of the county as a whole. Most importantly, each legislator has an equal vote. No more weighted votes. This is because they would be elected from new voting districts. These new districts will each have about an equal number of residents. This means a much more fair system of representation for all of the residents of Montgomery County. For the future, the charter calls for an independent commission to conduct redistricting after each 10 year census. The County Legislature would be responsible for the annual budget and for passing local laws and resolutions. The County Executive could veto the decisions of the County Legislature, but the County Legislature could override the veto. This means that there is a clear system of checks and balances.

The Charter does not affect the city and the villages at all. The city and villages will continue to have the same governments.

The Charter is important because it sets up a more efficient and responsive county government, and one that allows us to meet future challenges with accountability and responsibility.

The Board of Supervisors will vote on whether to put the Charter on the ballot. If they agree, it will be on the ballot in November 2012. In order to pass, separate majorities in the city and in the towns must approve the charter. If it passes, there will be elections for the County Executive and the County Legislature in November 2013. The Charter will go into effect on January 1, 2014.