

Worth Watching; A New Year Brings a New Cast To the Forefront of County Life

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

Date:	Jan 15, 2004
Start Page:	T.16
Section:	3
Text Word Count:	3953

County Executive Jack B. Johnson: His team is in place, he's no longer publicly jousting with the police union (at least for the moment), and his financial supporters include donors who supported his opponents in 2002. All in all, not a bad start. But Johnson (D) faces a number of complex challenges -- the financial crisis at Prince George's Hospital, to name one; the dearth of economic development in the county, to name another. What position will he take on legalizing slot machines? Will he mount a campaign to remove the county's property tax cap? The answers to these questions could very well dictate how voters judge his first term.

Rep. Albert R. Wynn: One of Prince George's most influential power brokers, Wynn (D) faces what is shaping up as an easy reelection bid this year. But larger questions remain about the congressman's long-range ambitions. Sure, he commands a solid base in Prince George's, with a list of allies that includes the county executive and five of the County Council's nine members, all of whose campaigns he endorsed. But Wynn is also mulling a run for the U.S. Senate if and when Paul S. Sarbanes retires. The question: Will the congressman play beyond Prince George's? Or will he decide that he wants to hunker down and be congressman-for-life?

Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele: Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s point man in Prince George's has been embroiled in occasional dust-ups with Johnson. Their most visible clash occurred when Steele (R), a Largo resident, advised the governor to nix Johnson's bid to remove the head of the county's planning board. They fight over other issues too, such as Prince George's Hospital and legalized gambling. Look for more elbows down the road.

County Council Chairman Tony Knotts: The council's newly elected chairman already has shown a propensity for shaking things up by removing council member Marilynn Bland (D-Clinton) from the county's hospital board. How Knotts (D-Temple Hills) handles the key issue facing his district -- the prospect of National Harbor and the possibility of legalized gambling there -- will speak volumes about his tenure. Knotts's political patron, Wynn, is the biggest booster of bringing casinos to Maryland. Knotts backs National Harbor but so far has not taken a position on gambling.

County Council member David Harrington: After a year in office, Harrington (D-Bladensburg) has shown he will take on hot-button issues, whether figuring out how much residential development to allow in the county's rural areas or preaching that white developers should include black investors and contractors. Harrington, the former mayor of Bladensburg, does have an eye on higher office. The questions are which one and when?

County Council members Thomas R. Hendershot and Peter A. Shapiro: Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick tock . . . Approaching the halfway mark of their final terms, Hendershot (D-New Carrollton) and Shapiro (D- Brentwood) may soon find themselves without a seat in Prince George's game of musical political chairs. What to do? They could try to repeal the county's term-limits law, but that failed last time. "I'll run for something," Hendershot predicts.

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan: As he positions himself for a possible run for governor in 2006, Duncan (D) plans to spend more time cultivating African American voters in Prince George's. Which raises a question: Why not rent an apartment in, say, Largo? "I have enough friends in Prince George's I can stay with that I don't need to," Duncan says.

Del. Victor R. Ramirez: One of the first two Latinos elected to Maryland's House of Delegates, Ramirez (D-Prince George's) made headlines before the session even began last year. As a freshman, he focused on learning the ropes. Now, with a year on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee and a host of thorny issues ahead, including slots and tight money, Ramirez has a chance to reclaim the spotlight.

State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey: Hardly a week passes that the county's top prosecutor is not out meeting with a civic group to talk about auto theft or crime on the border of Prince George's and the District. But Ivey's future is not just about law enforcement. His acolytes believe his political prospects are bright, particularly with his Harvard law degree and blessings from high-powered pols such as Sarbanes. But what is available? The U.S. Senate, or the House of Representatives? County executive?

Police Chief Melvin C. High: Since High took over eight months ago, his crime-reduction initiatives have included

restructuring two police districts and redeploying high-ranking officers to patrol beats. But High's top program is community policing and that could be a tough sell. Although violent crime has fallen slightly, it's not clear if Prince George's residents, particularly those in poor and working-class neighborhoods bordering the District, will ever warm up to the cops.

Sheriff Michael Jackson: A year after ousting his former boss from office, Jackson (D) has brought change to his agency, almost quadrupling the domestic violence unit from four deputies to 15. With his never-ending travels around the community, Jackson is expanding his base of support, which could serve him well in future campaigns.

Fire Chief Ronald D. Blackwell: He's the only public safety official to survive the transition from County Executive Wayne K. Curry to Johnson. A task force he heads is investigating the region's more than two dozen arsons.

Police Lt. Col. Jeffrey A. Cox: He leads the county Police Department's bureau of patrol. As community-oriented policing gains importance, the beat cops in his shop will see their responsibilities and visibility increase.

Police Detective Vince Canales: The operations of the homicide unit were called into question in Washington Post reports that said detectives had obtained several false confessions to close cases. Canales, a detective for seven years and new first vice president of the police union, has steered clear of the controversies, focusing on solving cases in a county with one of the region's largest number of homicides last year.

Schools chief Andre J. Hornsby: Contract squabbles with labor unions. A ballooning budget deficit left by his predecessor. Lawsuits filed by two former principals who challenge demotions. After seven months, Hornsby knows all too well that running the county's public schools is not for the faint of heart. But he hardly seems rattled. A former schools superintendent in Yonkers, N.Y., Hornsby has cracked down on spending practices and taken on labor leaders. Academics will dominate this year. Can Hornsby raise scores on standardized tests in a county whose students rank second to last in the state? It's a goal that has eluded his predecessors.

Community College President Ronald A. Williams: He has become a behind-the-scenes force in efforts to improve the county's ailing public school system, helping to form a business group to bolster funding for schools. A former Olympic runner from Barbados, he is sprinting in many directions to help his college expand its offerings and raise money,

Board of Education Chairman Beatrice P. Tignor: Her primary mission after taking over the newly constituted board two years ago was to restore an image tarnished by years of bickering. So far, mission accomplished. But challenges remain for this former state delegate who lost a bid for county executive 10 years ago. The schools remain overcrowded, not to mention underfunded and underperforming.

Tia Young: She's 17 years old, but Young plays the part of grown-up every other Thursday when she takes her seat as the student member of the county's school board. The Suitland High School senior is not shy about sharing her opinions. When not in school, Young can be found playing an active role in her church and lobbying for more school money in Annapolis.

Nathaniel Thomas: A government teacher at the public Forestville Military Academy, Thomas began to flex his political muscle last year, speaking out when teachers' contract negotiations stalled. A graduate of Suitland High School, he's likely to take an even more active role this year.

Alvin Thornton: As chairman of a state commission that studied education funding, Thornton is the man behind the landmark legislation to pump more than \$1 billion into Maryland's public schools. But the governor says tough economic times may make the cash hard to come by. Look for Thornton, a former county school board chairman and political professor, to be a big voice in the fray.

Developer Milton V. Peterson: The man behind National Harbor bought the property nearly nine years ago, and he is hoping to turn it into Barcelona-on-the-Potomac. But the question looming over southern Prince George's is whether state lawmakers will legalize slots and allow them at National Harbor. Peterson is mum on what he would prefer, though two years ago he insisted he opposed gambling. More certain is groundbreaking this fall for a 1,500-room hotel and 400,000-square-foot conference center.

Commercial real estate executive Charles Dukes: As the chairman of the county's economic development corporation, Dukes will have a big hand in shaping the Johnson administration's economic development policy next year.

Activists Donna Edwards and Bonnie Bick: Leaders of the opposition to National Harbor, Edwards and Bick have given members of Peterson's team fits by tying them up in assorted legal proceedings. The two leaders of the Committee to

Reinvest in the Heart of Oxon Hill scored a victory last year when the Court of Special Appeals ordered the developer to reduce the number of proposed office units. It's a new year, so look for the pair back in court.

High-tech executive Gary S. Murray: The founder of two \$100 million businesses is turning into a big player in business. Ehrlich appointed him chairman of the Maryland Economic Development Commission. He is also chairman of Greater Prince George's Business Roundtable. Oh, and there's politics, too: Murray's advisers include Curry and Major F. Riddick Jr., whose 2002 county exec campaign Murray helped fund.

Developer Derek McDaniels: One of the county's few African- American builders, McDaniels is involved in a number of projects in Prince George's, including some in south county. And politicians are starting to notice him. Johnson recently chose McDaniels to represent the development community on advisory boards for economic development and historic preservation.

Lawyer Marcell Solomon: For years, Solomon toiled in relative obscurity as a criminal defense attorney. Then his pal from Benedict College, Jack Johnson, was elected county executive. Now Solomon's Greenbelt firm has at least \$182,000 in contracts to advise the county on issues ranging from bonds to the transition.

Lobbyist Michael E. Arrington: If proximity is power, Arrington has it in his alliance with Johnson. After lobbying for the county in Annapolis for eight months, Arrington resigned and returned to the private sector, but he is still linked to Johnson. His clients include Milton Peterson and Gaylord Entertainment Co., which is to build the hotel and convention center at National Harbor.

Accountant Shailender K. Gupta: Johnson's campaign treasurer, Gupta was until this year an obscure player in Prince George's politics. No more. Gupta is Johnson's choice to help lead the effort to save Prince George's Hospital. But Gupta has not given up his old duties and is still counting the money for Johnson's campaign fund.

County lobbyist Leonard Lucchi: The only adviser to Curry who has survived the brave new Johnson world, Lucchi is the county executive's newly hired man in Annapolis, taking over for Arrington. It's a reprise for Lucchi, who played the same role for Curry. Johnson hopes Lucchi will show him the right moves in the state house.

Hubert "Petey" Green: A former County Council aide, Green two years ago started the Prince George's Black Chamber of Commerce because he was dissatisfied with the attention to small businesses from the county's 79-year-old Chamber of Commerce. Green's organization developed a substantial following. How substantial? The answer will come next month when the chamber issues a membership report.

Real estate broker Patrick Ricker: He supported losing candidates, including M.H. Jim Estepp, in each of the last two races for county executive. But Ricker survives and has even managed to find an apparently warm place in Johnson's heart. Maybe it's because Ricker threw Johnson a fundraiser almost immediately after he took office. Or maybe it is because Ricker bows down before the new county executive when there's a photographer around.

County Chamber of Commerce Chairman Richard K. "Chip" Reed: Reed, a lobbyist, is entering his final year as the chamber's chairman and also represents the Beech Tree development, which plans to break ground in Upper Marlboro this year on 2,400 housing units and an 18- acre golf course designed by Greg Norman. Look for Reed to play a leading role in pushing the chamber's agenda in Annapolis.

William D. Missouri, chief administrative judge for Prince George's judicial circuit: Missouri heads a committee studying the practice that allows Maryland judges to reconsider and reduce sentences of violent offenders, sometimes many years later. Later this year, Missouri's committee is expected to recommend cutting the time for reconsideration to five years after the initial sentencing.

Attorneys Terrell N. Roberts III and Christopher A. Griffiths: Roberts and Griffiths have racked up more than \$6 million in civil jury awards and settlements for clients who sued Prince George's police for brutality and other misdeeds. In 2004, the duo will represent an Arizona woman and her daughter who were jailed by Prince George's detectives for three weeks for a crime they did not commit.

Public Defender Joseph M. Niland: His attorneys won several important legal victories in 2003, including persuading Circuit Court judges to throw out videotaped confessions because police officers violated defendants' rights. This year, Niland and his team will be pushing for more access to the police force's drug lab practices.

Assistant U.S. Attorney David I. Salem: He's the go-to guy at the U.S. attorney's office in Greenbelt in white collar crime cases involving elderly victims. Last year Salem obtained guilty pleas from three people who stole \$3.6 million from a

District couple. Salem is also prosecuting a Potomac family for allegedly running an unlicensed money transfer business.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mythili Raman: She has made a name for herself around the federal courthouse in Greenbelt for successfully prosecuting several domestic slavery cases. More drama likely this year as Raman will attempt to obtain tens of thousands of dollars in restitution for one of those victims.

Police spokeswoman Barbara Hamm: As head of communications for the police force, Hamm is the new voice of a department that has long been known for being tight-lipped and mistrustful of scrutiny. Hamm, with 25 years of broadcast news experience, is well prepared for her job. She has sought to ensure that information about the department is more easily available. How Hamm and the department handle the next major story, whether it's a homicide or a police shooting, could define the tenure of her boss, Police Chief High.

Police Lt. Larry Gordon: Two years ago, Gordon became one of the youngest officers appointed to head the homicide unit. Gordon has enjoyed successes, including closure of several high-profile murder cases. As leader of the 37-member unit, he also has had fewer controversies with which to contend than his predecessors. But many cases remain unsolved.

Fraternal Order of Police President Cpl. Percy Alston: He took over the union's top job in late November, succeeding Tony Walker, who died after a car crash. As the voice of the rank and file, Alston brings many years of service as a patrolman and a detective. His success will depend in part on his ability to lift morale.

Private investigator Sharon Weidenfeld: The Greenbelt PI has uncovered evidence in dozens of cases of police misconduct, helping plaintiffs who sue county police win millions in civil jury awards and settlements. In a recent acquittal, she found a witness, whom county police had never interviewed, whose testimony helped support the defendant.

Attorneys Michael McGowan and John E. Smathers: These Laurel lawyers have won several civil lawsuits alleging misconduct by Prince George's police, and the record award for such cases. In 2001, a federal civil jury awarded \$4.1 million to Freddie McCollum, a Temple Hills man who was beaten so severely by county police that he lost his eye and partial use of his left hand. (A judge later reduced the award to \$1.6 million). McGowan and Smathers will go after county police again this year, filing a civil lawsuit on behalf of Desmond E. Ray, an unarmed Capitol Heights man who was shot in the back and paralyzed by county police Cpl. Charles K. Ramseur in December 2002.

CASA de Maryland President Gustavo Torres: Leader of one of the state's most prominent immigrant centers, Torres is poised to make CASA a major player in Prince George's. The Colombian native is talking to county officials about opening a Langley Park branch. He is also working with the county to create a hiring hall for day laborers. And Johnson also appointed him recently to chair a committee studying ways to improve high dropout rates among Latino students.

CASA de Maryland advocacy director Kimberly Propeack: She helped launch a major campaign last year to push immigrant-friendly laws through Maryland's General Assembly -- with mixed results. A bill to let illegal immigrants pay in-state tuition at state colleges was adopted by lawmakers but vetoed by Ehrlich. Propeack plans not only to renew that battle but also to aggressively resist proposed legislation curbing illegal immigrants' rights.

County Hispanic liaisons William Campos and Erick A. Oribio: Curry did not have a Hispanic liaison when he ran the county. Johnson has appointed two. Campos and Oribio have begun reaching out to Hispanics by organizing Spanish-language information fairs and a radio show. But those efforts will not mean much if the two cannot meet their toughest challenge: making sure all county agencies are equipped to serve the skyrocketing number of Latinos who don't speak English.

Philip O. Gainey, nephew of Jerry's Seafood founder Jerry Gainey: Gainey is the guy in charge at the county's power-lunch establishment. After his uncle Jerry's retirement last summer, the young Gainey has stepped into big shoes. The restaurant has not missed a beat. Gainey and business partner Jason "Chong" Lee have plans to expand the Prince George's eatery beyond the county with a catering business and owner-operated restaurants as far away as Delaware.

Betty P. Peebles, senior pastor of the 19,000-member Jericho City of Praise, Landover: Peebles returned to the pulpit of one of the nation's fastest-growing churches after treatment for cancer. The church was led by son Joel Peebles in her absence, but she says she is on the mend and expects to continue to lead the church, which often attracts politicians seeking a large audience.

John A. Cherry, pastor of the 26,000-member From the Heart Church Ministries, Temple Hills: For years, Cherry has been embroiled in a \$40 million dispute with the AME Zion Church. The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court,

which sent it back to the Maryland circuit court. At stake: ownership of a school building, a sanctuary and a Learjet. A settlement could come this year.

Lee P. Washington, pastor of the Reid Temple AME Church, Lanham: The leader of one of the fastest-growing churches in Prince George's -- it has more than 4,000 members -- has broken ground for a new building in Glendale. His new sanctuary is scheduled to open by the end of this year.

Brooke Kidd, executive director of Joe's Movement Emporium/World Arts Focus: She heads an active 12-year-old nonprofit arts organization in Mount Rainier that has been a catalyst for the incipient Gateway Arts District. With all this artistic activity in the 3800 block of 34th Street, Kidd has plans for expansion in the year to come, both in programming and space.

Artist Sonia Sadler: She splits time between her parents' home in Bowie and an apartment overlooking the Hudson River in West New York, N.J. She paints brightly colored images that represent family, culling from her childhood. She also depicts other memories from that time. She spent 10 years creating accessories, jewelry, sportswear and dresses for Anne Klein, Jones New York and Liz Claiborne before making painting her top priority. She has also illustrated children's books and made a line of greeting cards. Expect her to continue her prolific ways.

Ruth Waalkes, cultural participation director, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center: Waalkes works hard to involve students and the community in the center's events by creating partnerships with well-known artists and local arts organizations. Responsible for programming, she has brought an array of musicians, playwrights, actors, dance troupes and performance artists to the University of Maryland campus in College Park. Expect more high-profile productions this year.

Christel Stevens, performing arts specialist for Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission: Well versed in the differences among Panamanian cumbia, Hawaiian hula, Cuban casino rueda and Native American fancy dancing, Stevens plans and produces many of the county-sponsored cultural festivals and special activities. This year they include the annual Choreographers' Showcase in February; the annual Black History Month concert, which will feature soprano Michelle Howard-Hanson; the second annual World Dance Showcase at the Publick Playhouse in April; and events related to Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

University of Maryland running back Josh Allen: After sharing time with Bruce Perry this past season, the Eleanor Roosevelt High School graduate will be the incumbent as a junior in 2004. He led the Terrapins with 922 yards and eight touchdowns rushing this past season, averaging 5 yards per carry. Allen showed flashes of his ability, including a 257-yard, two-touchdown performance in a crucial victory over Virginia. He could emerge as a standout.

Bishop McNamara High School girls' basketball coach Mike Bozeman: Having built a powerhouse that ascended to No. 1 in USA Today's national rankings, Bozeman faces the next step of keeping his team at the top, a difficult challenge. The Mustangs will try to defend their Washington Catholic Athletic Conference and City Title championships. If successful, the Forestville private school almost certainly will have to be remembered as one of the best girls' basketball teams ever in the Washington area.

New York Knicks power forward Mike Sweetney: Selected ninth overall in this past summer's National Basketball Association draft, the Oxon Hill High School graduate and 2000 All-Met Player of the Year signed a three-year contract worth nearly \$5 million. Sweetney, who averaged 22.8 points and 10.4 rebounds last season for Georgetown University, has found out that pro hoops are much more competitive. In the season's first month, he played 42 minutes in nine games and had a high of four points. His development over the next year will be crucial.

St. Joseph's University guard Delonte West: The Eleanor Roosevelt High School graduate and 2001 All-Met Player of the Year is in a key role on one of the nation's best teams. West went from averaging 5.9 points as a reserve to averaging 17.3 last season, though he was hobbled down the stretch by an injured right leg. This season, starting in the back court with preseason all-American Jameer Nelson, West is second in Hawks in scoring with 17.3 points per game.

University of Maryland women's basketball coach Brenda Frese: Widely regarded as a go-getter, the second-year coach is recruiting the nation's top high school players, including last season's All-Met Player of the Year, Kalika France, from Bishop McNamara. With an influx of talent, Frese -- the Associated Press national coach of the year in 2002 at Minnesota -- could have the Terrapins moving up. Maryland has not played in the NCAA tournament since 1997.

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