

Jim Smith's legacy in Baltimore County seen in financial stability, Renaissance initiatives

Reflecting on the balance of eight years

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(Enlarge) This week, Jim Smith left the office of Baltimore County Executive after two terms. The former associate judge calls his time in office, "a wonderful part of my life." Staff photo by Kitty Charlton

Looking back on the eight-year tenure of Baltimore County Executive Jim Smith, one might say his greatest challenges came in the form of three storms.

Smith himself cites two of them -- Tropical Storm Isabel, which caused nearly \$1 billion in damages during Smith's first year in office in 2003; and "Snowmageddon" the February 2010 storms that buried the county under from three to four feet of the white stuff.

"Mother Nature was a challenge with Isabel, my first year in office, and then two back to back blizzards in my last year in office," said Smith, 68. "The response of the county to Isabel really established this administration because we, ... (the) community and county government, handled the crisis."

Others might say Smith's larger accomplishment is his navigation of a third storm -- the financial crisis from a recession that's now three years old.

While state government is wrestling with a projected \$1.6 billion deficit and other counties are struggling with cutbacks, Baltimore County this year approved a \$1.6 billion budget that stalled some capital projects, but also included no layoffs and no income or property tax rate increase.

And, administration officials say nearly every county department in the Smith administration will end the 2010 fiscal year with unexpended funds, totaling more than \$50 million.

"I am very grateful for Jim Smith leaving the county in such great financial shape in these tough economic times," said former County Council member Kevin Kamenetz, a fellow Democrat who became Smith's successor this week when he was sworn in as county executive.

"An important part of (Smith's) legacy will ... be the successful management of county fiscal matters, (including) tackling the employee health care and retirement issues well before any other government had done so," said Kamenetz.

'Renaissance' man

When he came into office in 2002 -- with a resume that included two terms on the County Council and 16 years as an associate judge for the Circuit Court -- Jim Smith proclaimed "renaissance" would be the hallmark of his tenure.

He pressed the County Council to approve Renaissance legislation that provides low-interest loans, architectural services and tax credits in older areas, and held Renaissance Roundtable sessions around the county to gather community input.

"This is not a plan I am trying to push through," he said in a December 2003 statement. "It is an idea, a new vision for building communities."

Smith said citizens embraced the Renaissance concept, which he calls, "more than brick and mortar," and have taken ownership of projects in their areas.

For instance, Smith points to Arbutus, where the county recently dedicated a \$13 million library and community center.

"We created that campus which the community is just thrilled with," he said.

He said Towson has seen \$500 million in investments in projects, counting commercial projects, county investment and implementation of parts of an Urban Design Assistance Team project to make the downtown more pedestrian friendly.

"We have people living downtown, which is something that the Towson community of businesses and residences wanted," Smith said. "This was what ... Towson envisioned,... so there would be 'feet on the street' in Towson after 4:30 (p.m.)."

Smith said nearly \$1 billion has been spent during the past eight years on school renovations and construction. The administration also touts commercial revitalization efforts in Pikesville, Randallstown and the Liberty Road corridor, as well as a new senior center in Woodlawn; a library in Perry Hall and library expansions in Cockeysville, Pikesville and Woodlawn.

The county has also added skate parks in Cockeysville and Hannah More and other parks projects, including the Reisterstown Regional Park Sportsplex, home to the county's public ice rink.

And since 2003, Smith's first year in office, total crime in Baltimore County has declined by 14 percent, while violent crime has declined by 23 percent, according to Baltimore County Police Department statistics.

"These are impressive statistics, and every officer in our police department, from Chief (Jim) Johnson to our newest cadet, deserves credit," Smith said.

Mixed report cards

The man Smith succeeded as executive, current U.S. Rep. C.A. "Dutch" Ruppersberger, said Smith has done "an excellent job" as executive, and cited Smith's revitalization and school projects.

"He had a good team, and I think you can give an 'A' for the job he did," said Ruppersberger.

Even a political adversary acknowledged that Smith's legacy lies in his neighborhood revitalization efforts.

"(Smith's) focus on renaissance and revitalization of older neighborhoods was visionary," said Republican 2010 county executive candidate Ken Holt.

But Loch Raven activist Donna Spicer said that in Smith's effort to create new projects, older communities targeted for revitalization under Ruppersberger were neglected under Smith.

"We had been working on (revitalization) initiatives for 10 years, but when Mr. Smith came along, his focus was elsewhere, then all of our efforts just died," she said.

"Smith was too concerned with red ribbon cutting and not the nitty-gritty concerns of the people," Spicer said.

Steve Whisler, a Catonsville-area activist who this year ran unsuccessfully as the Republican nominee for the 1st District seat on the County Council, said, "(Smith's) definition of renaissance includes high unemployment, bigger government and tremendous debt."

"It's unfortunate that the county executive was unable to solve our unemployment woes," he said. "Our

county's unemployment rate is much higher than all of the counties that touch our county."

In fact, as of September, the Baltimore County unemployment rate is 8 percent, according to Fronda Cohen, communications director for the county's Department of Economic Development. That compares to a 5.4 percent unemployment rate in Howard County, 6.2 percent in Carroll, 6.6 percent in Anne Arundel and 7.1 percent in Harford County.

But it also compares to a 11 percent unemployment rate in Baltimore City, and a national average of 9.6 percent.

Matters of debate

Smith started his tenure on a bit of a rocky patch with the County Council, clashing over the process of approving Smith's appointees. The clash included then-Council Chairman Kamenetz, who wanted the council to exercise new oversight duties over department appointees.

But those early disagreements smoothed, and over the years the two worked together on several initiatives, including contract negotiations and renaissance projects.

Now, Smith says of his successor, "I think the county is in particularly good hands," he said. "(Kamenetz) has great experience ... he is a very hard worker and he is a very bright individual."

The makeup of the county Board of Education, as well as county employee contracts and arbitration, are issues that have arisen over Smith's tenure.

Just days before the November 2010 election, Smith urged voters to reject Question A on the ballot, which called for a third party arbitrator to determine employee salary increases and other employment issues each year.

Smith claimed passage would hamper the executive's budget authority.

"The county executive is directly accountable to the people of Baltimore County ... for the budgetary decisions made," he said. "The arbitrator is not."

The motion passed anyway.

Still, Smith said he's proud of his record with collective bargaining.

"We've made significant and necessary adjustments to pensions, retirement benefits that have secured both benefits for employees and at the same time enabled us to avoid layoffs and furloughs and job freezes," he said.

On the school board issue, state legislators last year tried -- and narrowly missed -- to change the selection process. Currently, the governor selects members of the school board, but many residents have clamored for a board that would be elected by voters; or a mix of elected and appointed seats.

Smith disagrees, saying an elected school board opens the door to special interests pushing candidates. He also said there are "highly qualified people that are unwilling to campaign for the position, but would be excellent school board members.

"I think that the Baltimore County school board as it is presently selected works very well."

Another issue that has stirred controversy has been more political than policy -- the perception that Smith used his influence as executive and his own campaign war chest to back candidates for the County Council.

The executive's son, Michael Paul Smith, and his associate, David Gildea, held lucrative fundraisers for council candidates Cathy Bevins and Tom Quirk, who won election, and Gordon Harden, who did not. The executive himself backed Bevins and Quirk in radio commercials.

Holt, who said he believes Smith has done a good job overall as executive, said the influence issue leaves a bad taste.

"There needs to be a separation between the county executive and individuals vying for elected seats," said Holt.

"(Smith's) influence in the financial support of political slates, and the organizational management of candidates, is not in the interest of good and independent government."

Smith defended the activism, and said, "Let's face it, there were five new council seats (and) these people were generally unknown. ... Getting them known was critical to the opportunity for the community ... to see who they were."

Michael Paul Smith recently accepted an offer from Gildea to join the law offices of Gildea and Schmidt as a partner, adding his name to the firm.

Regarding any potential conflict of interest between land-use attorneys and council members they support, Smith said, "I think the people that have been elected are people who are in this for the good of the community.

"I mean, you could ask me the same question about a community activist who worked very hard for a candidate. Are they going to have undue influence because they worked really hard?" Smith said.

"Money is not the only thing you need to win campaigns," he said. "You need activists on your staff. You need community groups."

'We accomplished a lot'

Smith's time in office has been a mix of highs -- including re-election in 2006 by a nearly 2-1 margin -- and challenges, such as his 2008 triple bypass surgery that doctors said saved his life.

Last year he moved from his longtime residence in Reisterstown to Cockeysville, and flirted with a run for the State Senate in the 7th District -- though he ultimately decided against it.

For the future, Smith said he wants to stay involved in public service -- though he won't yet say how.

"I would like to have some relationship to local government ... and I'll see what balls I catch -- I have a bunch of balls in the air right now.

"I have been a very blessed guy. I practiced law in my own law firm for 17 years, I was deputy public defender for three or four years. I was a judge for 16 years and it was a very satisfying life.

I served in the County Council for two terms and I served eight years here as a county executive, and I feel very blessed that was a wonderful part of my life," he said. "We accomplished a lot."



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