

# THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Davis Kennedy/Publisher & Editor  
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## Bowser's fresh start

Pundits and other political observers frequently talk about honeymoon for newly installed officeholders, but crises — self-made and otherwise — can quickly derail the start of a politician's term. A year after Mayor Muriel Bowser took the oath of office, she seems to be on solid footing, with just one major misstep. That's a remarkable achievement for a brand-new mayor whom opponents had criticized as lacking executive experience.

In presentations about her first year in office, Mayor Bowser often recalls the first days on the job — when it snowed “for nine straight weeks” and when a Metro train filled with smoke, killing one rider and injuring dozens more. In both instances, the mayor's administration responded decisively. In the snowy weeks D.C. employees worked extra hours to clear the backlog of trash that accumulated due to icy alleys, and the District's appointees to the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's board of directors insisted on the hiring of a new general manager equipped to deal with the safety, reliability and financial problems that beset the region's transit system.

The ability to overcome the initial challenges speaks to one of the reasons we believe Mayor Bowser's first year has progressed relatively smoothly — strong appointments. Even before taking office she worked out agreements to keep Metropolitan Police Department Chief Cathy Lanier and D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson on board. She brought in a qualified outsider — Gregory Dean — to reform the D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department.

Mayor Bowser also turned to one of the candidates she defeated in the Democratic mayoral nomination — Tommy Wells — to head the city's environmental efforts, which have included a wind power purchase agreement that netted an international award from the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group. More recently, she has turned to another opponent from last year's primary, Busboys and Poets founder Andy Shallal, to advise on workforce development and job training programs as the volunteer head of the District's Workforce Investment Council.

Public safety issues have proved a difficult challenge, with a substantial rise in the homicide rate and with recruitment and training of new police officers falling behind the rate of retirements. Overcoming concerns about crime and violence will undoubtedly demand considerable focus in 2016, but elements of the administration's proposed legislative package would help. So too will the expanded use of body cameras to record police-citizen interactions, with the mayor set to sign authorizing legislation today for the expanded program. Funding is in place to equip 2,800 police officers who regularly interact with the public.

Hopefully the distraction of FreshPAC — the mayor's one serious blunder of 2015 — will not dominate the coming year, though there are questions that merit scrutiny. We're glad that organizers of FreshPAC, a pro-Bowser political action committee, ultimately decided to shut down operations, saying it had become too much of a distraction from the mayor's agenda. But the idea was objectionable from the very start: Developers looking to form relationships with the city were the most likely donors, and the use of the PAC's coffers to help D.C. Council allies and presumably harm foes smacks of the least palatable elements of politics. We wish that Ms. Bowser had shot down the idea from the get-go, rather than appearing at several of the group's fundraisers.

In an interview on NewsChannel 8 yesterday, Mayor Bowser said the groundwork laid in her first year — in areas such as ending homelessness and expanding affordable housing — will provide a solid basis for a great term. And tangible progress is in the works for expansive and long-awaited economic development projects at Ward 4's former Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Ward 7's Skyland Town Center and Ward 8's St. Elizabeths East. Given the many challenges that lie ahead, we hope that Mayor Bowser and her team can build on their first-year record.

## Mentorship effort tackles racial inequality

### VIEWPOINT

TOM NIDA

New construction continues to transform the District of Columbia's landscape and drive our economy. But as the District changes, many of our future adult residents are in danger of being left behind, unable to access the growing number of opportunities in this field.

Only 1.6 percent of all physical science doctorates and 1.8 percent of advanced engineering degrees are awarded to African-American scholars in our universities, a study by the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education has found. This compares to African-Americans comprising 13.2 percent of the national population — 49 percent in the District of Columbia.

This underrepresentation is a direct result of a lack of educational opportunities available for children growing up in urban poverty. This is especially true of the increasingly important STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — disciplines, as well as the emerging field of environmental sciences, whose practitioners are fueling D.C.'s construction boom.

The Architecture, Construction and Engineering Mentor Program empowers high school students by providing access to sponsors and volunteers who are accomplished in these fields. As the construction industry's fastest-growing mentorship program, now serving over 8,000 students each year and with over \$14 million provided in scholarships, ACE decided to partner with a District public education program.

Friendship Public Charter School serves over 4,200 pre-K-through-12th-grade students on nine District campuses, one of which is a new online academy for home-schooled students.

The charter school network operates two District high schools east of the Anacostia River. Students from these two college-preparatory academies will participate in the mentorship program.

At Ward 7's Friendship Collegiate, an informa-

tion technology career academy was created with the assistance of the District government. Ward 8's Friendship Technology Preparatory Academy is a brand-new \$18.3 million investment in one of the city's most underserved communities, specializing in STEM subjects and environmental sciences.

The mentees will spend time at architecture, construction and design companies with career specialists, broadening not only their understanding of these various jobs, but also how rewarding they can be for themselves and society. Role models are an important source of inspiration and motivation for students. No less significant is the opportunity to learn about the world of work at an early age.

External locations for ACE's mentoring encompass the entire D.C. metro area. Extended learning activities also will occur onsite at school after hours. These should complement the work of these college preparatory campuses, which this year posted a 92 percent on-time graduation rate at Collegiate Academy and a 97 percent rate at Tech Prep. These compare with averages of 64 percent for D.C. Public Schools, the traditional public school system, and 72 percent for D.C. charters.

Reliable data remind us that a successful pathway to a career is about much more than high school graduation, however. According to the Council of Graduate Schools, 4 in 10 African-American students who start a doctoral program fail to complete a post-graduate degree. All manner of issues — from financial burdens and isolation on campus, to family responsibilities and support — figure in their study as reasons that college success can prove elusive.

But a strong start, and dreams, can take shape early with industry mentors. Let's tap into the potential of all of the District's children. All of us will benefit.

*Tom Nida is regional vice president for United Bank for Washington D.C. and Maryland; board chair of the Charter Schools Development Corp.; and a former chair of the D.C. Public Charter School Board.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### D.C. needs to stop leaf-blower madness

In regard to the Nov. 25 article “Noisy dispute on leaf blowers,” I feel that I must correct some misconceptions expressed by Conrad DeWitte, the advisory neighborhood commissioner who opposed a leaf blower ban.

Let him stand on almost any weekday between 8 and 10 a.m. outside of 4850 Connecticut Ave. NW, where leaf blowers are used in an almost daily, year-round ritual of essentially “reverse vacuuming” the grounds. During this ritual they usually blow nothing but dust off the sidewalks and driveways surrounding the building, while they send a high-pitched and high-decibel scream of noise directly through the window of my Connecticut Avenue-facing apartment.

Let him don my \$300 noise-canceling headphones during one of my business conference calls and discover that they do not in fact filter the high-frequency noise produced by gasoline-powered leaf blowers. (Yes,

I have tried to solve this problem on my own.) Let him realize that multiple apartment complexes and an assisted-living facility nearby all employ landscaping contractors who use gasoline-powered leaf blowers for “general upkeep” of the grounds, in which they rarely — if ever — actually pick up anything. The leaf blowers are being used as a sort of gasoline-powered broom to “sweep” lawns, sidewalks, driveways — any surface that they want to “manicure.”

Nothing pierces the constant din of Connecticut Avenue traffic, trucks, ambulances, fire engines and accidents like a gasoline-powered leaf blower. This is not simply an annoyance. This is not a modern convenience. This is not “occasional use.” This is not the same quality of noise produced by lawn mowers, weed wackers, et cetera. This is a different spectrum and decibel level of sound. I do not believe that homeowners — or, more importantly,

apartment complexes and landscaping companies that do business in D.C. — have the right to inject high-frequency, high-decibel noise into my apartment almost daily at such a level that I cannot even conduct a simple business phone call or concentrate on work.

There are reasonable, effective, community-friendly alternatives. Please talk to the maintenance staff at the Ponce de Leon and Parker House buildings on upper Connecticut Avenue, my heroes. The grounds manager there will talk to you about the benefits of low-noise electric leaf blowers — no spark plugs, gasoline, backpack or earplugs to hassle with, and just \$70 at Lowe's.

Regarding enforcement: We know who uses leaf blowers on a nearly constant basis without actually picking up leaves or much of anything at all — the large apartment complexes on Connecticut Avenue and their landscaping contractors. Photograph them. Fine them. They usually do nothing but blow dust and leaves into the street the vast majority of the time. Stop the madness. Stop the noise.

Joey Spatafora  
Forest Hills

Tom Sherwood is on vacation. His column will resume when he returns.