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### The End of Kitchen Governance; A Town Hall Gives Tiny Barnesville a Place for Meetings; [FINAL Edition]

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**Full Text** (1449 words)

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For more than half a century, the residents of Barnesville, population 160, elected their mayor and two commissioners in Margery and Bob Lillard's garage, dropping their ballots into a cigar box advertising Capital Perfectos for 5 cents.

Last week the cigar box, age unknown, was just about the only tradition observed as the northern Montgomery County town held its election.

This time, a handwritten poster led nearly half of the village's 118 registered voters not to the familiar garage next to the home where Bob Lillard was born 74 years ago, but to the new town hall.

"It's the way it should be," said Lillard, a retired computer supervisor for the National Institutes of Health whose father ran the town's general store.

For the first time in the lifetime of many of its residents, this rural village with an annual operating budget of \$60,000 will have something big cities possess: a place of governance. For years commissioners' meetings have been held in Mayor Peter T. Menke's kitchen or the Catholic church's pavilion. First lady Patty Menke, the town clerk, has found space in her living room and basement for all of Barnesville's records as well as the town safe, which holds certificates of deposit and deeds to property. "We need a town hall," she said. "I'm tired of this."

She's finally getting one, though it will take many months to refurbish it.

The new town hall is not quite new. The town's residents had it built in 1925 for meetings, school plays and social functions but gave it up about 20 years later because they believed they couldn't put it to good use. "The commissioners didn't meet but twice a year in those days," said Elizabeth Tolbert, 79, who served as mayor from 1965 to 1969 and again from 1975 to 2001.

Northern Montgomery is not the quiet rural enclave it used to be. Developers have built just about everywhere they can in southern Montgomery and have set their sights on upcounty towns such as Poolesville and Clarksburg. Governing Barnesville is now a more complicated, time-consuming task as its leaders work to keep developers from building too many houses and businesses on its streets, which have no sidewalks. The town's commissioners recently realized that they had not updated their master plan in about 14 years, though state law requires them to do it more frequently. So they are now redoing their zoning laws.

"I want to make sure the town stays the town," said Luke Fedders, 36, a sales executive for a Gaithersburg technology firm who was elected a commissioner May 2.

Surrounded by the county's 93,000-acre agricultural reserve, where development is strictly limited, Barnesville's 64 houses rely on wells and septic systems for water and sewer service.

The town's leaders want to keep it that way. "We don't want water and sewer to come up," said Menke, 63, a high school athletic director, who has been mayor since 2001. "It would create a great deal more pressure to develop. Obviously we don't want that. One of the things we are about is trying to keep a small-town character, and that could quickly diminish."

The town hall, which Barnesville's leaders once again took possession of in 2003, has become a sign of the efforts to hold on to an old way of life. "Part of our focus is not just to keep development out, but to not let the history get wiped out," said Jim Brown, 57, a lobbyist in the District who, along with his wife, Tina, 53, moved to Barnesville from Bethesda in 1999. "I think it's all part of preserving the legacy."

Barnesville once was made up mostly of families who had spent generations in the rural town, near Sugarloaf Mountain. In recent years, however, more people have fled to Barnesville from congested southern Montgomery neighborhoods. Although many of them work in the District or southern Montgomery, they have grown as protective of the town as those who have inhabited it for decades. Like everyone else, they worry about the traffic on Barnesville Road, which gets packed with commuters at rush hour. They worry about whether sidewalks will drastically change the town's character.

"This little town is very conscious of its history, which I like," said Glen Percy, 60, a filmmaker who, along with his wife, Susan, an artist who is also 60, moved to the village 10 years ago from Bethesda. "Even though I don't share history with this town yet, I like the fact that others do."

On May 2, the young and the old, the newbies and the old-timers gathered for a new kind of election night. Menke was reelected mayor. Bonnie S. Brown, 45, a public school teacher, was reelected as a commissioner. And Fedders beat incumbent J. Houston Miller for the third spot on the commission.

In their first peek at the new town hall, voters found just one big room with a stage and a small office in the back, and a small basement. There were holes in the ceiling, and pieces of wood and unhinged doors strewn about. It was dusty and cold, and there was no bathroom. The cigar box sat on a folding table covered with a U.S. flag tablecloth; an antique lamp brought from the Menkes' house beamed a ray of light on it.

Yet the building was a hit with voters, who lingered in the chilly room after they had cast their ballots, eating cookies and cake baked by Patty Menke, who at 52 has been town clerk for 11 years.

"There's a lot of storytelling elements in an old building like this before you fix it up," said Tina Brown, an artist who lives in a former Civil War tavern.

"I find it a nice affirmation of the town's past," said Glen Percy.

Recapturing the town hall was a years-long endeavor. Tolbert, who calls herself the "chairman of the resurrection," can trace the history best because she is one of the few people who remembers the building in its glory days. Tolbert, who was "born in the bed I sleep in," recalls reciting a poem on the stage when she was 6 as one of three first-graders at Barnesville Elementary, which was across the street from the town hall.

The building was the center of activity back then. The townspeople watched minstrel shows and silent movies there. They held their sixth-grade graduation there. "Lots and lots of activities went on here," Tolbert said. In 1945, she said, the town sold the building to the Lions Club, which often held dinners in it. "They had it until the wives got tired of cooking in that cellar," Tolbert said.

After that, the widow of the town's Baptist minister bought it and converted it into a residence. When she died, her relatives took possession of the building. For at least 20 years, it has stood vacant on the corner of Barnesville and Old Hundred roads, infested by termites and in dire need of a coat of paint. The town had it condemned at one point. "Oh, it was sad," Tolbert said.

A few years ago, Tolbert and other town politicians decided they needed a place for political meetings and social functions. They wrote letters to the minister's descendants asking them to give it to the town in return for a tax break. Two years ago, the family agreed.

That's when the hard work began. "You could barely get in the front door," said Peter Menke. Debris was everywhere, the ceiling was falling apart, the floor needed to be fixed and termites were all over what used to be the kitchen.

For the past year, Menke and others have volunteered their time to clean the building. They hired contractors to

do the major structural work, such as fixing the floor, which had sunk into the basement. There is much more work to be done as the town awaits the county government's decision on a water and sewer system. Though Barnesville is incorporated, the town's leaders decided long ago that they did not have the capability to monitor a water and sewer system, so they gave that task to the county government.

Earlier this year, Menke and Tolbert went to Annapolis to ask for financial help to fix the building. One by one, county politicians pleaded for money, many of them for millions of dollars. Menke and Tolbert asked for just \$85,000. "Everyone snickered," Tolbert recalled.

The state awarded Barnesville an \$85,000 matching grant. The refurbishment, estimated to cost \$170,000, is expected to be completed by the fall. "We have been extremely careful as a town with our money," Peter Menke said. "We have our share ready to go."

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