



COURTESY ERIC SWALWELL

Maryland's Eric Swalwell spearheaded the creation of a student-liaison position in the City Council.

Get a Voice on City Council

By Eric Swalwell

March Madness 2001: Thousands of students riot on the **University of Maryland** campus as the school's beloved Terrapins lose in the Final Four basketball tournament to perennial rivals, the **Duke University** Blue Devils. As the students took to the streets, the city incurred nearly \$1 million in damage as cars were overturned and cable lines destroyed.

The response from College Park, the non-student community, was outrage. The City Council held a hearing on ways to improve the city's response in the future. The university and city worked autonomously to solve the problem. In essence, each pointed fingers at the other.

With the Final Four as the catalyst, the city and the university needed to work on improving their relationship. After identifying the tension between both the students and College Park, I realized that there was a communication gap. What both sides were lacking was a liaison to coordinate and inform each one about events, priorities, and problems.

As a member of UM's Student Government Association, I sought to broker this relationship. My idea called for a "student-councilman." The student would attend every weekly council meeting and would

speak on all agenda items, introduce resolutions, and be privy to all city materials through a courier service provided by the city. The student would be able to not only inform the Council of the students' needs, but also inform the students about the Council's actions. After all, there are a myriad of volunteer, committee, and extracurricular activities available in the city that students weren't informed about.

I began lobbying in November 2001, capitalizing on a Council election year in College Park. With incumbents seeking re-election and a powerful student vote, the councilmen were willing to listen.

After the election, I immediately began to lobby every councilman elected. Using a simple method of inviting each one out to lunch, I pitched my idea. I also followed up each meeting with a phone call, and a thank-you card. I even recruited councilmen in favor of the idea to handle some of the lobbying load. I immediately began to grasp the will of the Council: About a third were entirely in favor of the idea, a third needed more convincing, and a third probably wouldn't vote for it. Two councilmen detested the university and

mutual obligations—a student on the Council. The mayor agreed, and said he would assist me in brokering a deal with the councilman opposed to the idea and the three who needed more convincing. After four months of lobbying, he agreed to place the topic as a work-session agenda item. Work sessions are the Council's opportunity to hammer out resolutions before they come to a formal vote.

The work-session produced the compromise I was hoping for. I was willing to concede the student's vote and a chair at the formal session dais. In return, a firm majority agreed to grant the position full-speaking privileges, the right to introduce resolutions, a seat at the work-session dais, and access to all city records. I also secured the vote of a potential naysayer by agreeing to have the student serve one full year, even during the summer and university holidays. This, we agreed, would ensure that a student would not have "a nine-month agenda in a twelve-month year."

On April 9, 2002, after months of hammering out dozens of agreements and compromises, the Council voted 7 to 1 to approve the position of student-liaison to the College Park City Council. They also

Grab a Seat

Although it's common to see students run for local office, just a handful actually win. Here's how two leaders did it.

made their feelings painstakingly clear every meeting. They would be the biggest hurdles.

Strategically, I decided to especially continue targeting those who needed more convincing and one of the three who would probably not support it. It should be noted that the Council consists of eight councilmen and a mayor who can break a tie, if necessary.

After a crucial dinner with the mayor, I finally was gaining momentum. I convinced him by illustrating the sharp differences between both factions and explaining that the only method of resolution was an individual who shared

voted to name me as interim liaison until the student was found. The resolution called upon SGA to select the student-liaison through a search of the entire undergraduate student body.

After reviewing a number of applications, I was named the first student-liaison to the College Park City Council. My term began in May 2002 and will end April 2003.

My first meeting as student-liaison was with the mayor, the president of UM, and the school's top officials. Everyone in the meeting agreed to work closer to solve problems like riots, noise problems, and resource sharing.

In June 2002, the mayor invited me to attend the Maryland Municipal League's annual conference in Ocean City, Maryland. Without a room to stay in because of cutbacks in SGA's budget, a councilman offered to put me up. His gesture was symbolic of the changes that already were beginning to occur between the two groups. Where we once had trouble coinciding peacefully, we now were sharing a room for a conference where we both testified about our new partnership.

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Swalwell's tips to create a student-liaison position

1. Create an outline. Map out your goals and know what you want to accomplish. Take into consideration time and feasibility.

2. Know your allies. Who can help you achieve your goals? Engage college administrators, fellow student leaders, and experts in municipal government to assist you in your quest.

3. Show the council you're serious. Attend every meeting and speak during public forums. If you want to be a part of their decision-making process, it's crucial to put in equal dedication.

4. Do your homework. Learn how the city council operates; study its constitution and by-laws, and know its legal implications.

5. Meet the council. Nothing is more important than learning and meeting each member of the council. Tell them your goals and provide incentives. It's also important to understand their concerns and what could benefit them.

6. Make compromises. Shoot high and eventually settle on the maximum compromise you're willing to make. Being reasonable and flexible is important to garnering respect and legitimizing the position.

Schooling the Board

By Michael Marcelli

"I, Michael Marcelli, do solemnly swear, that I will faithfully and honorably support and defend the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the state of Michigan, to the best of my ability, so help me God." And with that oath of office, with dozens of family members, friends, and neighbors in attendance, I became one of the youngest elected officials in the country at the age of 19. So how did I get involved in politics? Opportunity knocked on my door.

In 1996, the Southgate Board of Education in Michigan set out to create a new five-year plan for the school district. The board's trustees wanted to find out what the community was looking for in their schools for the 21st century. Nine committees were established, and each required a representative to add a student's voice to the discussion. I was selected to serve as a student-liaison, and I enthusiastically joined the committee on innovations in curriculum. The committee met for over a year and produced a series of initiatives for the school board's consideration.

In our district, a student from the high school sits at the board meetings and offers insight and opinion on behalf of the 5,200 students in the district. A few months after my committee dissolved, the board started looking for a new candidate to replace the graduating student-liaison, and my name came up. After an interview process, I was selected as the district's student representative.

Shortly after my appointment, our school board placed a very large bond issue on the ballot. The new buildings, renovations, and technology upgrades being discussed originated from the committee on innovations that I had first gotten involved with. I became active in speaking engagements throughout the city and school community. It was a great opportunity for me to meet community members and work on my speaking skills.

The bond issue passed, and I was getting ready to head off to **Colorado State University**. Sadly, a beloved member of the school board died of cancer very suddenly. With only two weeks until the filing deadline for the now vacated seat, a candidate with name recognition and ability was needed. Interested parents and friends tried to convince me to run for the board while I was still in high school. Though flattered by the offer, I initially rejected the idea, believing that getting a degree should be my focus.

My best friend and I were settling in for a long afternoon of studying when I received the call that changed my life. A friend's mother who had headed the bond issue committee and was a powerful woman in the community wanted to know if she could come over and discuss an important

Marcelli's local election tips

1. Follow your dreams. Be persistent in your quest to fulfill them. Even though I lost my first election, it didn't detour my second attempt.

2. Don't be afraid to fail. You settle for mediocrity if you're afraid. When you resolve to run for public office, you're never alone—people will always be there to support you.

3. Decide what price you're willing to pay. Time is a limited asset in your life, and you have to sacrifice to achieve your goals.

4. Accept responsibility. Develop constructive ways to improve your faults.

5. Know your turf. Serving on the school board gave me the experience to shoot higher—to know why I was serving and what I was getting into.

matter with me. About 20 minutes later, a caravan of supporters and well-wishers arrived at my house. They presented me with a plan of action and reasons why I should run for the board. I told them that I'd think about it. The decision would mean that I'd have to change my plans for college. If elected, I'd have to live in the community that I was elected to, so I had to find another university. After thinking about it with a select group of trusted friends, I filed my candidacy papers the next morning and began the process of applying to **Wayne State University** in Michigan.

From the very beginning of the campaign, we decided that I was an unorthodox candidate and should play that angle. Although everyone told us the standard campaign colors were red, white, and blue, we knew we weren't a standard campaign, so we went with lime green and black instead.

The days leading up to my election were great. Finals were over. The students were excited that a young person was finally going to have a say in how the business of the district was operated. Election Day came, and I got to the polls early that morning to hand out literature. Students came to the polls to vote, many for the very first time in their lives. After classes let out, my friends went

and worked the other polls all over the city.

As the votes came in, I took a commanding lead. By the time I arrived at the board's offices, only one precinct had failed to report and the absentee ballots still needed to be counted. The last precinct reported, and my win felt all but final. As far as I knew, I was the youngest elected official in the nation.

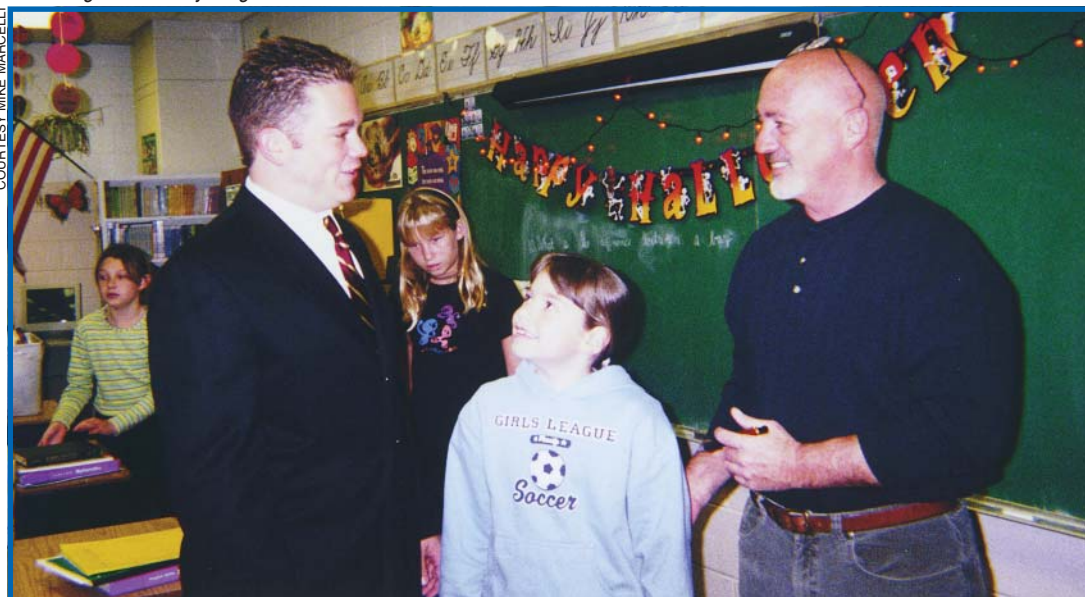
Unfortunately, my first attempt at the board was unsuccessful. While I won overwhelmingly at the polls, one of my opponents did exceptionally well in the absentee ballot. In the end, I lost by a mere 32 votes. It was a crushing defeat. To have felt that I had won for nearly four hours and then to be told late at night that I had lost was overwhelming. However, I was still committed to attending WSU and to running for office again.

I ran the next year and won with the highest voter turnout in recent memory. Today, I serve as board treasurer. Our board oversees a thriving district with 600 employees and a growing budget of \$39 million. The Southgate district has some of the most modern and impressive buildings in the entire metro area. Our students continue to excel and achieve at levels that can be attributed to our incredible staff and devoted parents. Having a young person on the school board has had an impact. Having the experience and knowledge as a recent high school graduate has given the board a new perspective from a student's point of view.

Young people can, and always have, made a difference. I would encourage young people to run for office. You may not win, but you'll definitely raise the level of debate in your community about what's important to students and the future of your schools, communities, and state. This has been the experience of a lifetime, and I'm only 21. Opportunity only knocks once, so don't be afraid to accept the burden of leadership. **SL**

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At 19, Michael Marcelli (left) won his election for Southgate Board of Education in Michigan, becoming one of the youngest elected officials in America.



COURTESY MIKE MARCELLI



Learn more about Swalwell's and Marcelli's campaigns at www.studentleader.com