

Man Runs for Mayor, Faster Than the Traffic

Rockville Hopeful Beats the So-Called Rush

By Eve Zibart
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In Rockville's city elections, everyone is running on the Rockville Pike issue—all three mayoral candidates, and more than 50,000 cars a day.

So far, though, only independent candidate Steve Van Grack has tried putting his soles into the race.

"A few people walk on the Pike. Some jog and some dodge," said Van Grack, repeating a favorite campaign slogan.

And some run for their political lives. Yesterday morning, wearing jogging shoes, a black "Van Grack for Mayor" T-shirt and a rueful smile, Van Grack took his campaign to the street with a two-mile race against rush-hour traffic.

Taking a red light's head start at Viers Mill Road, and with a major assist from a truck blocking the right lane, Van Grack beat the challenge car, driven by a slow and sympathetic supporter, to Rollins Avenue: 14.5 minutes to 17.

"I'm not out to impress anyone with my time," said Van Grack, adding that his usual pace is eight minutes a mile. "But when you can travel as fast by foot as by car, you know the traffic is out of control."

"Besides," he added, nursing a turned ankle, "there's not even sidewalk all the way."

Rockville Pike, the city's Main

Street, municipal thoroughway, mega-mall and meal ticket all in one, is at the physical and rhetorical heart of nearly every development debate in the city.

Officials estimate as much as 75 percent of traffic within the Rockville city borders (between Gade Drive and Rollins) is commute-through only, funneling from adjoining neighborhoods to the Beltway. A study commissioned last year by city planners reported that daily volume around the Montrose Road intersection reaches 55,000 cars.

"It's not going to go away," Van Grack said. "And we need it—Rockville Pike is the financial backbone of the city. But we have to alleviate it, reroute it . . . make the Pike 'pedestrian friendly.'"

Even with his arguable victory yesterday, the 37-year-old Van Grack, who is generally considered to be trailing incumbent Mayor Viola Hovsepian and City Council member John Tyner, may have trouble staking out the Pike as his private expressway to City Hall.

All three candidates have suggested ways to ease the daily traffic jam: increasing shuttle bus service to subway stations, adding access and turning lanes, coordinating with county planners to disperse regional traffic, and improving signal synchronization (a county responsibility).

But at least Van Grack can claim shoes-on experience.