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"JUSTIN KISKA STRESSES UNITY, COMMUNICATION IN SECOND BID FOR COUNTY COUNCIL SEAT"

By Kelsi Loos



President of the Way Off Broadway Dinner Theatre, Justin Kiska, is planning an encore run for county council.

The 38-year-old business executive and theatre producer will be running in the 2018 election as a Republican for one of the two At-Large council seats.

Kiska ran unsuccessfully in 2014 when the council was first created, earning an endorsement from the Frederick County Teacher's Association.

He said that, if elected, he will aim for a more unified, communicative county council.

"We need new voices already," he said. "This council has already become so divided over personal, petty issues that others things fell to the wayside."

Kiska said he would like to focus on issues like development, education and business development. He would also support efforts to make it a stronger check on executive power.

As someone who grew up in Walkersville and has had roots in Frederick County since age 5, Kiska has seen the county grow and change. He calls himself pro-growth, but not supportive of "development for development's sake." He said he would prioritize business development over residential development.

County Executive Jan Gardner's proposal to limit the use of Developers Rights and Responsibilities Agreements was "sound," he said. DRRAs "freeze" certain laws and regulations to insulate developers from policy and fee changes. Critics say they lock taxpayers into bad deals. Gardner is working on a bill that would require them to include an "enhanced public benefit" and limit the contracts to developments with more than \$1,500 homes.

In respect to education, Kiska stressed the importance of funding schools beyond maintenance of effort levels mandated by the state.

"I look at it as an investment," he said, noting that roughly half the county's budget goes toward education. "We need to make sure we have the best teachers, first of all."

He also stressed the importance of technology in the classroom.

One area where Kiska believed he could find savings to support those efforts would be in school construction. Building with an emphasis on utility over aesthetics, he said, could leave savings for other areas of the school budget.

While Kiska has not held elected office, he does have prior political experience. Around 1999 and 2000 as he was graduating from George Washington University, he worked for Elizabeth Dole's presidential campaign. He started as a volunteer and had become a member of finance staff by the time she dropped out.

He also worked with the conservative think tank Empower America, doing researching and preparing information for the directors. That, he said, helped him prepare for the "policy wonk" side of legislating, noting that he would have to go through a budget line by line and analyze communities to evaluate the effectiveness of policies.

The County Council consists of seven members, five elected based on geographic districts and two at-large. They serve four-year terms and currently earn \$22,500 annually.

The 2018 primary election is on June 26, and the general election follows on Nov. 6.