

## Mayor starts 4th year virtually tarnish-free

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### *Purcell overcomes bumpy start with business community, wins praises of downtown leaders*

As Mayor Bill Purcell begins his fourth year in office today, the most remarkable aspect of his first term may be how little controversy or political animus he has confronted.

There have been minor skirmishes concerning the closure of the Nashville Thermal Transfer Plant, complaints about changes in the chipper collection service and an occasional rumbling from the business community, various Metro Council members and judges. But no force or issue has come close to handing him a defeat.

"He's now in the fourth year of his four-year term without stepping on any land mines," said Davidson County Clerk Bill Covington, a longtime participant in the political scene. "It's unprecedented in my opinion."

How has the 48-year-old lawyer and former state House majority leader done it, and can he keep it up with a re-election bid less than a year away?

It has been a combination of hard work; a timely, non-controversial, community-based agenda; a weakened Metro Council; Purcell's political skill and luck, observers say.

Purcell has stayed focused and has not wavered since entering office in September 1999 on an agenda of improving education and directing the city's resources to neighborhoods, sidewalks and public safety.

He announced a \$286 million capital spending plan this week that included \$50 million for schools, \$20.6 million for sidewalks and bikeways, \$27 million for a parks master plan and \$43 million for jails and court space.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of his political triumph in office came in June 2001. With the governor and state legislature under siege for weeks by noisy tax protesters three blocks away at the Capitol, Purcell quietly pushed a 25% property tax increase through the Metro Council. The 40-member council voted almost unanimously for the plan, and there was barely a peep from residents and taxpayers.

"The thing that amazes (you) about Bill Purcell, whether you're friend or foe, is how hard he works," said Metro Councilman-at-large Leo Waters. "He attends more neighborhood gatherings, more groundbreaking and events than any mayor I can remember. He's got so much energy that people see him so much and feel good about him. He can talk and at the end of it, whether you're getting exactly what you want out of it or not, everybody in the room feels good."

Waters said the 40-member Metro Council had been weakened by term limits, but he said the government had become more responsive, customer-friendly and efficient since Purcell took office.

Purcell has started a mayor's night out, in which he meets monthly with citizens in various communities, and his First Day celebration has built community enthusiasm for the beginning of the school year.

With the Aug. 7, 2003, election just more than 10 months away and Purcell's six-figure campaign war chest growing, another lingering question is, will a credible challenger emerge?

It is too early to discuss what shape his re-election bid will take, Purcell said in an interview Thursday. For now, he said, he is focused on the agenda he ran on and the work to be done. He expects about \$40 million in sidewalk projects to occur over the next year or so, he said, and he expects more efficiency in road paving and in other initiatives overseen by the Public Works Department now that a new department director is in place and an audit completed.

Purcell said he had brought more efficiency to government and changed some of the culture of Metro through the series of departmental audits that he implemented. He said the challenge was to keep the momentum going and to continue improving the services the government provides.

"If you want to know the secret of success in government, it's the same as the secret of success in private business and in journalism — you just get up and work hard," Purcell said. "If you do that for the right reasons, you will be successful."

Charles Fentress, who left the council in 1999 after 24 years, does not think a Purcell challenger would have a chance. Several others agreed that there was very little political animosity toward Purcell, and that those who may have any would be hard-pressed to find any issues to cling to.

"He's done what he promised he was going to do. That's good," said Fentress, a conservative who heads a political action group encouraging business-minded candidates to run for Metro Council next year.

Fentress, a retired local department store executive, said he had heard complaints from some in the business community that it is harder to get in to see this mayor and that the planning department is more difficult to work with.

But, Fentress said, Purcell isn't the first mayor to get complaints from the business community. Richard Fulton had problems in his first term as mayor in the mid-1970s after being in Congress for several years. Fulton adjusted, and the two developed a good relationship, Fentress said, but it took some time.

Purcell is "one of the best I've ever seen on his feet," Fentress said. "He ran on his people-oriented agenda, neighborhoods and sidewalks. We'll see. He may shift some of the things in his agenda if he runs for a second term."

Steve Gibson, the executive director of the Downtown Partnership, said the friction that Purcell had with the business community in the first couple of years was not uncommon for any new administration. The two sides were learning how to deal with each other, and the relationship has improved greatly in the past year, Gibson said.

Gibson said Purcell expected business groups to have a consensus on proposals when they brought them to him and that they had adjusted to his approach.

Purcell has been very helpful as downtown businesses have tried to alleviate parking problems through several cooperative initiatives with the city, Gibson said. The mayor's capital spending plan announced Wednesday includes a town square at the Metro Courthouse and an underground parking garage with 1,440 spaces, which will net 300 additional spaces downtown.

"I think when he first came into office there was a sense he was focused on neighborhoods," Gibson said. "I think (downtown businesses) are happy with him now and have found him very cooperative. People like him as the mayor."

Purcell's popularity in the black community has been good, said Rosetta Miller-Perry, owner and publisher of the *Tennessee Tribune*, an African-American newspaper.

Miller-Perry said there was a sense that more blacks had risen in the middle management of Metro government under his watch, and that he had talked about diversity since his campaigns. Still, there are not enough minorities in the top jobs in Metro, she said.

Many blacks would like to see Purcell take leadership in helping clean up dilapidated buildings on Jefferson Street and to include more improvements to their community.

"One of the reasons African-Americans like him is he still involves himself in our community," Miller-Perry said. "So often, white politicians come after the vote, but we don't see them until they run again. He's not like that."

Purcell's focus on education and the nuts and bolts of making government work better is astute, said attorney David Raybin, who has known Purcell for 20 years. Raybin, who represents the Fraternal Order of Police, said Purcell had improved the pay of the police department and that the department was not losing as many officers. Raybin said Purcell's success had been a mixture of hard work and luck.

"Just keeping the thing going without a major crisis is a testament to his leadership skills," Raybin said. "Some people say, 'Well, what has he done?' He's avoided a lot of the major catastrophes other major cities have had. That, in itself, is an accomplishment. ... He feels it's his watch and he's responsible. He takes a very hard, hands-on, aggressive approach."