

Our say: With Leitess' selection, judges make a good call

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As an assistant state's attorney for 23 years and the office's team leader on violent crimes since 2007, Anne Colt Leitess is eminently qualified to lead the county State's Attorney's Office until the 2014 general election. After that it will be up to county voters.

Leitess, who has handled hundreds of felony cases, was chosen last week for the interim appointment by the county's Circuit Court judges. There were eight other applicants, including two others currently working in the office. She'll replace State's Attorney Frank Weathersbee, who is resigning on Wednesday after holding the job since 1988. He'll be joining the Maryland State Parole Commission.

Weathersbee, a Democrat, had endorsed his second-in-command, Deputy State's Attorney Thomas Fleckenstein, for the interim appointment. That drew criticism from the county Republican Central Committee, which accused Weathersbee of trying to reward Fleckenstein, a major donor to the state's attorney's 2010 re-election campaign, by giving him a leg up for the 2014 election. Weathersbee, in turn, blasted the Republicans for dragging politics into the selection process.

Leitess may not have been Weathersbee's second-in-command, or his first choice, but after nearly a quarter-century working for him she is obviously part of his team. The judges evidently thought it should be up to the voters — not them — to decide whether the State's Attorney's Office needs a major change of direction. Leitess' selection won't do much to head off the principal criticisms any Republican candidate is likely to raise next year: that the office is suffused with cronyism and relies too much on plea bargains.

Weathersbee, who never seemed overly fond of having to campaign every four years, remarked recently that "The state's attorney's job is not a political job — it's a public service job." There's something to be said for that: The position's main requirements are administrative skill, legal smarts and a commitment to seeing justice done. There aren't separate Republican and Democratic approaches to prosecuting criminals or looking out for the interests of victims. (The latter, in particular, is an area in which Weathersbee broke new ground.)

But for better or worse the job is elected, and its holder is automatically one of the most influential figures in the county in his or her party. County voters have preferred continuity and experience in the job, regularly re-electing the Democrat Weathersbee even as other major offices trended Republican. No doubt name recognition played a role.

In any case, an interesting and important decision awaits the voters next year.

A pattern

Leitess' selection as Anne Arundel County's first female state's attorney continues an intriguing pattern. The county executive? A woman. Her new chief administrative officer? A woman. The acting police chief? A woman. And now the new acting state's attorney.

At the moment, the most noticeable boys' club left in local government is the County Council. Perhaps the voters will want to do something about that next year.