



**The official word.....40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interview**  
David M. Jenkins

***Bernard C. “Bernie” Fowler** helped define politics in Southern Maryland for 31 years. The courtly Mr. Fowler, a Broomes Island native, served on the Calvert County Board of Education from 1962 to 1969, the Board of Calvert County Commissioners from 1970 to 1982, and then represented the county in the Maryland State Senate from 1982 until 1994.*

*One of the highlights of Mr. Fowler’s career was his one-year stint as the chairman of the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland, a regional planning agency, from 1974 to 1975. To help the council celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, Mr. Fowler sat down to reflect on the highlights and challenges of his term on the council.*

**Senator, what do you remember about your early days on the Tri-County Council?**

Well, I was sworn in as president [of the Board of Calvert County Commissioners] on Dec. 4, 1970. You were automatically a member of the Tri-County Council as a commissioner. Our first meeting on the council was aboard the governor’s yacht on the Patuxent River. We met on the board and we had an orientation, an indoctrination to what they were trying to do.

**You remember a lot!**

Well, the council was still in its infancy then. It was created after the abolition of slot machines to help the region cope.

The council functioned very well in those early years. At times, we had moments of diverse opinions. That’s what a democracy is all about. I think what we tried to do is divorce ourselves from parochialism, which is difficult to do at times, and look at the region and work together as a team, unified, for the betterment of Southern Maryland.

Even though we had robust discussions, we tried to maintain our sense of direction, stay the course and do the job.

**Do you remember any of those “robust discussions?”**

Oh yes. Two come to mind.

The legislation [that created the Tri-County Council] gave each one of the elected [state] officials one vote. But each board of commissioners had only one vote. And we felt since we were the fiscal sponsors, that that was not as democratic as we would prefer.

That went on for several years, and because of our tenacity and a better understanding of the folks in Annapolis, they figured we were right, we should be on equal footing. And that rule was changed.

The other one was the growth in the area.

You had to be a little visionary as to what was going to happen down the road in Southern Maryland. We knew in Calvert, we knew in Charles, we knew in St. Mary's, with the dualization of the roads, the [Gov. Harry W. Nice Memorial] Bridge coming on, the rather short commute into Washington, D.C., and the beautiful amenities we had here in Southern Maryland, our community was going to be unquestionably an attraction for growth.

The object to create a plan to address the growth for the entire region.

The local boards of county commissioners didn't feel like we played a large enough role [in creating a growth management plan]. We didn't have a voice in that. So we started all over again.

Everything worked out alright. Wise heads will usually come together for something good.

**During your time on the council, you became known as one of the strongest advocates on behalf of the environment in the state.**

I'll tell you a story about that.

[The council] asked me to be the keynote speaker at one of their dinner meetings at Shorter's restaurant in Benedict. And at that point, there was a lot of concern about the Patuxent River. We had met with the governor, we had met with the attorney general, we had met with the [environmental] secretary, and we had told them about the poor attention being paid to the river.

And at that dinner meeting that night – I still have a tape of that speech, but I don't know if it works, it's so old – in my mood of desperation, I remember saying, "We've done everything we could, ladies and gentleman. Now we can build a monument here to the death of the Patuxent River, or we can take another course: I'm going to recommend we seek relief in the courts.

**And that sparked a lawsuit to force the government to clean up the river.**

We won three suits in the federal courts of the District of Columbia. The bottom line was, the ruling said we were right. They didn't even bother to appeal it.

I tell you this because had it not been for the Tri-County Council, we wouldn't have had that success.

The Tri-County Council, in my opinion, particularly in those days, served as a forum. It was a catalyst for getting things done.

**You're still concerned about the health of the river.**

I retired of my own volition in 1994. When I left, I was retired, I didn't have the same level of enthusiasm [for public life]. Well, lo and behold, I began to notice the water getting cloudy again. The grasses are disappearing again.

I went to sleep at the switch. I got complacent.

**But you still do a lot of work on behalf of the environment, like your annual wade in to the waters of the Patuxent off Broomes Island.**

We do that not so much for the thrill of getting our feet wet, we do that to focus attention on the river. I'm 81 years old. There aren't many voices like mine left around. My thinking is, Let's get it back to where you at least where you feel comfortable eating the fish again.

The river ... that's been a burning desire of mine. I grew up on the river. That's something will stay with me as long as the Lord allows me to stay on the planet.

**Are you optimistic for the future?**

Oh yes. We can bring the river back. You can do it. If we can get the governor, the president of the senate and the speaker of the house to work together and prioritize the Patuxent River, great things can happen again.

**And where would you like to see the Tri-County Council play?**

Remember, the council is really the elected reps of Southern Maryland, and I'd have to say with all honesty and sincerity, that the council has served us well. I don't see the same level of desire for the natural amenities we have. They are more focused on economic development. I think some of the other things have taken a back seat. That isn't a criticism. They are just living in a different time.

**Senator, thanks for taking the time to speak with us.**

Thank you for the opportunity. I appreciate it. I hope it was helpful.

*David M. Jenkins is the Tri-County Council's executive director.*