

## Joe Hoeffel takes over as board chairman

By Keith Phucas

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NORRISTOWN — Montgomery County Commissioner Joseph M. Hoeffel became board chairman Wednesday, replacing James R. Matthews, who resigned the post following his arrest Tuesday for allegedly lying to a grand jury.

Hoeffel and Commissioner Bruce L. Castor Jr. voted to promote Hoeffel to the chairmanship. Castor said he had no desire to chair the board telling Hoeffel earlier, "being chairman now would be like becoming captain of the Titanic after you hit the iceberg."

Matthews did not show up for the public hearing on the budget or the regular board meeting held in Courtroom A at the courthouse.

"(Matthews) advised me at about 10 o'clock last night that he would not come (to the meeting)," Hoeffel said. No reason was given for not attending.

On Tuesday, Hoeffel called Solicitor Barry Miller and asked him to resign. Deputy Chief Operating Officer James Maza was appointed to take Miller's place as solicitor, and

(See HOFFEL on A3)

**Above, Montgomery County Community College students hold up signs during a county budget meeting in Court Room A in the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown Wednesday. County commis-**

**sioners proposed making cuts in funding of MCCC, county parks, trails and other county projects in the upcoming budget.**

Photos by Gene Walsh

he joined Castor and Hoeffel on the dias Wednesday.

Amidst the governmental crisis, Hoeffel, a Democrat, and Castor, a Republican, showed a rare unity.

"Yesterday was a bad day for Montgomery County, but it is the beginning of a lot of good days that I believe will be coming," Castor said. "I think I'm not exaggerating, and Joe will correct me if I'm wrong, that Commissioner Hoeffel and I spoke more yesterday together than we have in the entire four years that we have been in office."

Hoeffel and Matthews had been investigated during the past year by a grand jury for possible violations of the state Sunshine Law after it came to light they and other staffers routinely met at an East Norriton restaurant for breakfast and allegedly discussed county business.

The grand jurors did not find evidence that the two commissioners committed a crime, though the report concluded Hoeffel and Matthews "are not credible" when they claim they had never deliberated on official business at the breakfast meetings that always excluded Castor.

"While I believe much of the grand jury's report is subjective and misses the mark, the grand jurors are absolutely right about one thing — no man is above the law," Hoeffel said. "The grand jury expects the chairman of the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners to tell the truth, and I will."

Matthews was also investigated on other allegations and allegedly lied repeatedly about his relationship with a title firm, Certified Abstract Co.

Castor said he spoke by phone with Commissioners-elect Josh

Shapiro and Leslie Richards to keep them updated on the evolving situation.

Later at a Salary Board meeting during the regular meeting, the two commissioners removed Miller from the county's personnel roll and downgraded Matthews' salary now that he is no longer board chairman from \$90,846 to \$87,647, Castor said.

The commissioners directed Maza to prepare a legal opinion on whether the officials have the authority to remove Matthews from various boards of which he is a member.

The commissioners' staff has been asked to review the grand jury findings and report back during Tuesday's public meeting.

Neither of the two commissioners said they planned to ask Matthews to resign as commissioner.

"I think that is his decision to make," Hoeffel said. "I am not going to ask him to resign as commissioner."

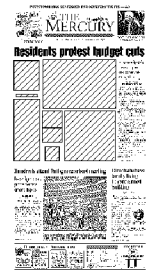
Castor's response to the question was less diplomatic.

"I would never welcome him back," he said. "But whether he should resign or not is a decision that he has to make, or at least be given time to make in the best interest of the citizens of Montgomery County."

If Matthews delays his decision, Castor said he may "weigh in," but he believes Matthews would not take his advice.

"And I am acutely aware that if I were to suggest what he should do, he might do precisely the opposite just to spite me," Castor said drawing a laugh from the audience.

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**Montgomery County Community College student Christine Chiodo speaks about the positives of MCCC during a county budget meeting in Courtroom A in the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown Wednesday.**



Photo by Gene Walsh

**County Commissioners Joe Hoeffel, left, and Bruce Castor Jr. listen to county residents during a budget meeting in Courtroom A in the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown Wednesday. Commissioners are proposing cutting funds to county parks, trails, community college and other projects.**