

OPINIONS & VIEWS

The Federation Corner

Lamari Defends Volunteer Firefighters

"The present system served us well on September 11"

The Sentinel Newspapers have offered the Montgomery County Civic Federation (www.montgomerycivic.org) an opportunity to present the issues and opinions of affiliated community organizations. The viewpoints expressed may not necessarily be those adopted by the Federation. Any resident who would like to contribute to this column should contact Federation Delegate Alyce Ortuzar at 301-774-6617.

News and Events

Jan. 12th Civic Federation Delegates Meeting on Electricity Reliability

There will be presentations from PEPCO, the State of Maryland People's Counsel, as well as Public Citizen – a public interest advocacy group (www.citizen.org/see "Analysis of Impact of Deregulation on Electricity Reliability and Price for Consumers;" and "Critical Mass Environmental and Energy Program.") Representatives of BGE and Allegheny Power will also answer questions at 7:45 p.m. in the County Council Building Auditorium (downstairs). The public is always encouraged to attend and get involved.

Rally for Energy Efficiency will be Held in Annapolis on Saturday

The Annapolis Hybrid Car Caravan/Parade and Rally will be held on Saturday, Jan. 10 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Last spring the Maryland General Assembly passed an historic energy efficiency bill that would reduce peak electricity use in our state by about 400 megawatt hours and would save Marylanders \$600 million by 2020. But Gov. Bob Ehrlich vetoed this very reasonable and very popular bill.

The General Assembly will now have a chance to "override" Ehrlich's veto with another vote right after the legislative session begins Jan. 13th. So on Jan. 10th we will be gathering for a noon parade and rally outside the capital building in Annapolis. Rendezvous at 11:30 a.m. in Annapolis by the Capitol building. For more information contact Dawn Ratcliffe at 301-920-1644.

Reminder

The Maryland Arab American Committee will host an examination of the Patriot Act on Sunday, Jan. 11 from 1 to 4 p.m. at the Potomac Community Center. For information contact Brien Kinkel, 301-578-8930 or kinkel@earthlink.net.

Maryland Organic Food and Farming Association 13th Annual Meeting also on Saturday

"Farmers and Consumers Building Communities: A Regional Organic Food System." The meeting will feature speakers, workshops, homegrown lunch, literature tables, community supported agriculture.

Presentations to include "Local Sustainable Agriculture as National Defense: The Cuban Experience" by Brian Snyder, and "Organic Farming and Nutrition" by Sally Fallon.

Where to find the meeting

Saturday, January 10th at the Maryland Department of Agriculture, 50 Harry S. Truman Pkwy in Annapolis, Md. For information: www.marylandorganic.org; (301)774-6617.

Message From the President

Happy New Year and Good Cheer to everyone! It's 2004, and I hope you all had a great New Year celebration and that you're able to keep those resolutions you made after your second, third or maybe fifth glass of champagne. I, for one, will promise to be less wordy in these articles during the coming year, but I'm sure none of you will believe me, so let's see how I do in this column.

This month I want to discuss two concerns: our fiscal needs and our safety needs. Members of the County Council have expressed distress with our fiscal situation. The significant budget surplus enjoyed in recent years and used to bolster our Triple A bond rating has now been depleted.

It is estimated that we will have a revenue shortfall of over 100 million dollars in the coming fiscal year. The council must make real hard decisions to protect the trust we, the voters, have placed in them. They must demonstrate fiscal responsibility; however, to do so will most likely upset many county employees as well as community groups.

Last year, prior to the election, the Civic Federation and the Montgomery County Taxpayers League warned the County Council and the Executive that hard fiscal times were coming. We argued that the contracts being negotiated with the county employees' union, the teachers' unions and the career (paid) firefighters were not sustainable. We felt that these contracts were inconsistent with the fiscal concerns and measures being implemented by organizations and businesses in the private sector.

Having said this, now that these contractual commitments exist, our county government should resort to any and all possible cost saving measures and exhaust all other options before considering renegotiating or renegeing on these contracts or raising taxes.

Given these fiscal concerns, I am bewildered by the tenacity with which the County Council seems to embrace Fire Bill 36-03. For more than a century volunteer fire fighters and rescuers have risked their lives to protect the lives and personal property of their neighbors. This form of volunteerism is probably the oldest and most noble form of citizen participation we have. Montgomery County has been well served by these heroic individuals, and we tax payers have enjoyed significant fiscal savings due to their volunteer work.

Fire Bill 36-03 threatens to radically change this system, and I'm not convinced that the changes would be for the better. Members of the County Council have suggested that no chain of command exists in the current system. Let me clarify the facts.

The current system is governed by the Fire Rescue Commission, which is chaired by the Fire Administrator, currently Mr. Gordon Ayogi, an executive-paid appointee. Commissioners include career (paid) firefighters, volunteer firefighters and lay citizens. This Commission develops the voluminous "Policies and Procedures" manual that is adopted by the County Council and which all professional firefighters and rescue personnel—both paid and volunteer—follow.

The next link in the chain of command is the Fire Administrator who is responsible for the day-to-day management, administration and coordination of our 33 fire stations, 27 of which are solely owned by the volunteers and paid for by neighborhood contributions and fundraisers.

The final tiers of the command structure are the Local Fire

Department Chiefs. They are required to run each station in accordance with the "Policies and Procedures" manual and in times of emergency they are subject to the authority of the Fire Administrator. These 33 Department Chiefs are trained and seasoned to make life and death decisions every day on a case-by-case basis. Over 100,000 "incidents" are triaged and dealt with by the local chiefs and members of these stations each year. Council members supporting Fire Bill 36-03 would have us believe that these life and death decisions should better be left to the fire administrator in Rockville. The current Fire

Administrator, Gordon Ayogi, is not and has never been a firefighter, and no Fire Administrator can reasonably be expected to be on call in Rockville 24/7 all year long.

They have also made erroneous arguments that the needs of "homeland security" require us to abandon our century-old system. Well, the present system served us well on September 11, 2001, and continues to serve us well. Far from being "broke" and requiring "fixing," it functions superlatively and at an affordable price.

The proposed changes could cost us from \$25 to \$50 million more in annual costs. For these reasons, and because the fire safety system here in Montgomery County has been nationally recognized as being efficient, professional and of the highest standard, I believe Bill 36-03 should be withdrawn.

It should be noted that one member of the County Council, within days of the public hearing on Bill 36-03, held a campaign fund raiser sponsored by the very unions which stand to benefit by the passage of the bill. This kind of fund raising activity may be legal. However, in my humble opinion, such activities have the appearance of an ethical conflict.

