

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - October 7, 2004

Ballot Question "C" debate

Councilman Phil Andrews speaking FOR Question C, and
Councilman Steve Silverman speaking AGAINST Question C

Question C would eliminate the four at-large seats and create nine small, single member districts. These "community-based" districts will be much less costly to run for and will open up participation in election campaigns to more well-qualified candidates including women and minorities. Officials elected from nine equal districts should better reflect the needs of the citizens and the long term concerns of the whole county. Come to the "GREAT DEBATE to learn more or go to the website at: www.VoteYesOnC.org. The MCCF sponsored debate occurs on Monday, October 11, 2004 at 7:45 p.m.. It is being held in the 3rd floor auditorium of the Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Avenue Rockville.

Board of Education Candidates Forum

On November 2 you will have the opportunity to vote for people to serve on the Board of Education. The Board of Education has an important voice in determining the quality of education our children receive. You owe it to your children to vote for the best board members.

MCCF is holding a Board of Education Candidates forum to help you decide upon the "best" candidates. The Forum will be held on Thursday, October 14, from 7:30 PM until 9:00 PM in the Grand Courtroom (2nd floor) of the Red Brick Courthouse (29 Courthouse Square) in Rockville. Ample parking is available nearby at the County Council Office Building (free) and, for a modest charge, at the gated lot adjacent to the nearby Regal Rockville movie theater.

Ambulance User Fees may be headed your way

By Marcine D, Goodloe, MCCF Public Safety Committee

County Executive Douglas M. Duncan has presented his plan for the implementation of ambulance user fees for Montgomery County (Council Bill 32-04). And prior to the County Council's October 19 Public Hearing on this matter, the County Executive has requested a \$4,270,560 advance on future collections.

While there is universal agreement that funds are desperately needed to repair, maintain and replace emergency fire apparatus and ambulances, are ambulance transport fees the most equitable and cost-effective way to go? What other proposals have been considered to raise this money? Might it not be more equitable to simply raise the special Fire Tax a few pennies and spread the apparatus repair and replacements costs consistently across the County, thereby eliminating the high cost of outside contractors and new administrative costs associated with implementing and maintaining of the proposed plan? Has anyone calculated how many fire trucks and ambulances might be purchased or repaired using the funds that will go toward these new administrative costs?

As the debate on this subject continues, take a moment to consider some of the concerns raised by opponents at last year's attempt to institute these transport fees:

- Health insurance companies that agree to cover such fees (\$350) will pass the costs on to the insured in higher premiums. Some insurance policies will not cover EMS transport. And some insurance companies and Medicare may refuse to pay these fees if they determine the call was not an actual emergency. Those that have no insurance, generally the unemployed or low income residents, may be forced to pay out of their pockets if the identification program fails.

- A major portion of the new funds raised will not be used for their intended purpose, but rather toward administrative costs such as outside billing contractors and new administrative personnel.

- A percentage of the funds collected will be doled out on an annual basis to the local fire and rescue departments depending on a response formula, expected to be approximately 11 %. This calculation will be another involved process and will likely need additional administrative oversight and expense.

- Hospitals may cease replenishing emergency supplies to ambulances crews since they will now be charging independently. This will further increase operating costs.

- It is expected that county residents will discontinue contributing generously to their local volunteer fire and rescue departments, since they will henceforth be charged a high fee if they need to use what used to be a public service.

- It is still feared that those in need will not call for help if they know they will be charged a fee.

Individuals are urged to attend the public hearing on Bill 32-04, scheduled for October 19 at 7 PM in the Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave, Rockville. and express concerns about the plan. Above all, we must treat everyone who lives and works in Montgomery County in a fair and equitable manner, while continuing to provide the same outstanding fire, rescue and emergency medical service we presently enjoy, at the best and most reasonable cost.