

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - February 24, 2005

What is "mansionization?"

By Mike Diegel
Allied Civic Coalition

The Allied Board for some time has been monitoring the rise of "mansionization"—when the buyer of a relatively small home in an established neighborhood tears down the existing home and builds a new one (or does an extensive remodeling) that pushes the boundaries, both in terms of lot setbacks and building heights.

The issue is attracting increasing attention as property values rise in close-in, desirable neighborhoods on both sides of the Potomac. According a recent article in the Washington Post, the problem is causing tensions as the new homes appear to be out of character with older neighborhoods and encroach on property lines.

While the Post article focused on northern Virginia, a recent Gazette article examined the issue in Montgomery County. In one example, a 4,000-square-foot home was erected in a neighborhood of older Colonial style homes that typically are less than half of that size. However, the Gazette added, "While the trend is most visible in Bethesda, it is beginning to spread to other parts of Montgomery County, including neighborhoods around the redeveloped Silver Spring town center and other older communities."

Robert Hubbard, director of the Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services, said "You're not going to stop the redevelopment. I'm not certain you want to stop the redevelopment, reinvestment in the community. It is a positive. But I don't think we've hit that magic standard yet that appeases the existing community and allows individuals to build what they see as their dream or their need."

In a related article, Councilmember Howard Denis noted "of all the constituent issues that have been brought to my attention, this has been brought to my attention more often than just about anything else." Denis is working on a zoning amendment that would close a loophole in the 35-foot height limitation, in which a property owner can build an artificial terrace and measure the height from the top of that terrace.

The Town of Chevy Chase is considering going farther by increasing the amount the setbacks a home can occupy, which would have the effect of shrinking the portion of a lot size that a home could legally occupy.

Second Annual Conference on Mansionization

by Wayne Goldstein
MCCF First Vice President

Last April, the Montgomery County Civic Federation helped to sponsor, along with lead organizer Montgomery Preservation, Inc. (MPI) and others, the first ever, citizen-organized conference to inform people about the effects of "mansionization" on existing neighborhoods and to offer ways for them to have a meaningful voice in further impacts. MCCF will again join MPI in sponsoring the 2nd Annual Conference to be held Saturday, April 9th in Washington Grove. We have chosen the close-knit community of Washington Grove as our conference location because we feel that they know more about building and maintaining community than anyone else in Montgomery County. We believe that neighborhoods and their citizen associations can make better progress in resolving how to deal with the great challenge of mansionization if they become more aware of why their community is special and what about it is worth preserving.

Participants will spend the day enjoying the company and hospitality of many Washington Grove residents as they learn more about the accelerating pace of mansionization around the county, its impacts on stormwater runoff and on trees as well as the character of neighborhoods, and what can be done to control these impacts. We will end the conference with a guided tour of this uniquely beautiful historic town and with a reception given by town residents. Please plan on attending because I believe you will come away from this event with a greater awareness of what is at stake and a greater appreciation for what community means and how important it is to all of us. I'm also a delegate from Kensington Heights CA, a conference sponsor as well. For more information, contact me at 301-942-8079 or at waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com.