

"Federation Corner" column
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The value of neighborhood citizen associations

By Jim Humphrey

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A friend recently asked me why her community should have a neighborhood citizens association. The following is the reply that I emailed to her.

While it is not very big in terms of land area, Montgomery County has a very large population. According to the 2003 census update, the county has almost a million residents, more than seven states--Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Delaware or Vermont. In the United States, our representative democracy was designed as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." And, in Montgomery County, our neighborhood citizens associations and local homeowners associations are the most basic units of that form of government. Meetings of these groups function just as town and village meetings do elsewhere. They serve as "mini-democracies," allowing citizens to voice their concerns and vote on the critical issues that impact their communities and their daily lives.

But, the voice of the people in Montgomery County--even close to a million people--can often be drowned out in the discussion of important issues by the more politically persuasive voice of special interests. These special interests, such as the development community, often make large contributions to local political campaigns that result in their having special access and influence over the decisions of our government. As a result, eighty years ago neighborhood citizens groups decided to band together.

Ever since the Montgomery County Civic Federation was founded in 1925, residents have had an instrument to amplify their voice when seeking redress of grievances or when weighing in on an issue before the county government. The Federation is akin to a congress of neighborhood groups that allows residents to speak to the county government in a unified voice, attempting to balance the influence of special interests. Its mission is a simple one: to sustain and improve the quality of life for the citizens of the county. To find out more about the Civic Federation, or download a membership application form, check out their website at www.montgomerycivic.org.

Just as voting is important to the health of a representative democracy, so is participation in the functions of government. By speaking up at a neighborhood association meeting, you can influence others to your position. Then, your local citizens association can seek the support of other groups by joining and actively participating in the Civic Federation. And, as a result, the Federation will then have the strength in numbers to seek those changes from government that will make life better for us all. But, in a democracy such as ours, the responsibility to participate falls first and foremost on each individual citizen.

Neighborhood associations often have working committees that are usually in need of volunteers--so, sign up to help. An Education Committee could work with local PTAs to insure your kids get a good quality education. To investigate and provide input on development planned for within or on the borders of your community, you might establish a Land Use Committee. And, a Traffic and Safety committee can work toward limiting traffic through your neighborhood and improving pedestrian and bicyclist safety. Neighborhood associations also need volunteers to attend meetings of groups like the Civic Federation, the County Council and Planning Board, and your regional Citizens Advisory Board, in order to share your issues of concern with others.

In addition to their contributions to a well functioning democracy, neighborhood associations can also help meet the social and service needs of a healthy community. My neighborhood group annually hosts a

Valentine's Day Social, Christmas Cookie Exchange, and a Fourth of July Parade comprised of our kids riding decorated bicycles and wagons. These events and others bring us together informally, and help welcome newcomers to the neighborhood. Our association members also serve meals to the homeless at the local soup kitchen on a regular basis, and roll up their sleeves for an annual Spring planting to beautify our local elementary school. And, our newsletter keeps members current on the official and social news, advertises babysitting, lawn care and other services provided by our neighbor teens, and strengthens our sense of community.

As former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "It takes a village to raise a child." Similarly, it can also take a village or neighborhood association to help senior citizens in need of assistance, lend a hand to single-parent families, grieve over our losses, and take pride in our accomplishments.

Montgomery County has a long tradition of neighborhood citizens associations, helping create in each of us a sense of belonging and stability that strengthens us individually and collectively and improves the quality of our lives.