

"Federation Corner" column
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Introducing the Montgomery County Civic Federation

by Wayne Goldstein
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I hope you have been educated and energized by the many provocative essays in this Federation Corner column. I'd like to give a little background about the organization whose members often write the columns. The Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) was founded in 1925. A 1938 history stated: "More than a decade ago thoughtful citizens of the County became alarmed at the gap which was continually widening between local government and its citizens... To close this gap between the citizen and his government, the Civic Association movement gained ground... The [MCCF] has succeeded far beyond the expectations of its founders. Past years have seen local Civic Associations delegating their community leaders to perform volunteer service on their behalf in the Committees of the Federation and to contribute to debate on the floor of propositions of importance to the community." Major achievements of this period included prohibiting county employees from receiving county contracts and placing county police under the Civil Service.

The "Guide to the Records of the [MCCF]" in the County archives includes an "Administrative History... The various civic-minded associations created in the early 20th century were all dedicated to improving services in their respective communities. No single organization, however, sought wholesale changes in the system of County government until the Civic Federation took up this challenge in the 1930s... Influenced by New Deal politics and by an influx of progressive-minded federal employees, the [MCCF] began to work toward home rule. The Federation had long advocated a larger, more active County government, but limited its efforts to supporting initiatives of other groups and individuals. By 1936, the Federation sought to develop a home rule charter, create a merit system for employees, and appoint a County comptroller."

In 1937, MCCF formed a committee to study how to improve county government; in 1938, MCCF "passed a resolution calling for the County Commissioners to fund a third-party study of County government" & in 1939, the County Commissioners hired the Brookings Institute of Government Research for the study, entitled "Government in Montgomery County," released in 1941. "The study recommended sweeping changes to the County government, including replacing the Board of Commissioners with a County Manager and a nonpartisan County Council, a County employee merit system, and the formation of a Civil Service Commission." The demand for home rule was opposed by the commissioners. Nevertheless, MCCF voted to establish the Montgomery County Charter Committee (MCCC) which worked diligently toward a charter referendum that passed in 1948.

"Throughout much of its history, the Federation was in conflict with the County government because it championed such politically unpopular causes as a nonpartisan County government, a County Manager system, and the abolition of state-appointed officials to the MNCPPC and the WSSC. During the 1950s, the MCCF supported selection of the school board through nonpartisan elections, and contributed to the revision and improvement of enforcement of zoning codes."

In the past year, MCCF and its committees have been very active. Our Education Committee was very involved with the many twists and turns of the plans for Seven Locks ES and with changes to several important policies concerning community participation and Board of Education (BOE) staffing. Due to concerns about a lack of independent oversight, the County Council agreed with our recommendation to increase its own staffing of education analysts. The Committee continues to diligently monitor any plans to surplus or sell school land.

Our Housing Committee has investigated a number of violations of the MPDU law by the director of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs and has repeatedly brought it to the attention of the County Council. Our Planning and Land Use (PLU) Committee has participated in all of the many hearings concerning Clarksburg and other site plan violations. The PLU Committee's report to the County Council in August 2005 was well received by both the Planning Board and the County Council. The Committee's regular presence before the Planning Board has helped that body begin to come up with a logical and defensible way to investigate and make findings on violations and to then assess fines and approve plans of compliance.

Our Environment Committee has spoken out about problems related to lack of enforcement of the county's Forest Conservation Law (FCL) and committee members are on working groups seeking to strengthen the FCL, to minimize residential stormwater runoff onto other properties, and to write a new Clean Water Permit that will actually help clean up and protect the county's creeks and streams.

A public official recently commented that "The [MCCF] is against everything." A far more accurate statement would be that MCCF has often been for solutions that are opposed by the government or that MCCF is against government solutions that we believe cause more problems than are solved. MCCF has been challenging and changing county government for 81 years. I have the privilege of being the 47th president of the MCCF. It may be of interest that the first woman president of MCCF was elected in 1973 and the first Latino president was elected in 1988.

In the coming year, MCCF will continue to be the strongest and most consistent voice for our member associations and the rest of the county's residents. We welcome community members who would like to join one of our dynamic committees. For more information, go to our website at www.montgomerycivic.org