

"Federation Corner" column
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Whatever became of citizen inclusion?

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In the wake of the 2006 revelations that developers of a dozen projects in Clarksburg and elsewhere had violated their approval agreements, there was a widespread call for more citizen inclusion in all areas of county government decision making. But recently the term citizen inclusion is given little more than lip service from elected and appointed officials, as the rhetoric from last year's elections fades in the public memory.

Granted, County Executive Ike Leggett has held a series of Town Hall Meetings at which he appears to listen attentively to citizen comments on various issues. When the County Council holds such events, however, they consume much of the valuable time promoting their own involvement in issues they themselves consider important rather than listening to their constituents, as they do at the start of nearly every public hearing they hold. (Note to Council--they are called "hearings" because you are supposed to be hearing from your constituents how they feel on the issue at hand; you'll have your opportunity to state your own position when the item comes up for Council discussion and vote at a later date.)

Some instances of citizen inclusion have been hard won. After the County Executive convened an Affordable Housing Task Force early this year and appointed its members, the Civic Federation had to request that a representative from our organization be allowed to join the group. Most other members of the Task Force were either government officials involved in housing matters or members of the development industry. This was a surprising oversight by Mr. Leggett, since he is well aware that the MCCF has been representing the interests of county residents since its founding in 1925.

Other processes for including citizen opinion are still on the drawing board. The Planning Board has spent the last six months drafting a new Development Approval Manual with a group comprised of members of the public and from the development industry. If adopted, the manual will institutionalize the recommendation that developers meet with the nearby affected community before submitting plans for a development project. A developer applicant will be required to submit a sworn affidavit stating which neighborhood groups were contacted about the proposal, any community concerns, and the response by the developer to those concerns. If and when the Council finally approves use of the manual, it will be a welcome step in the right direction toward citizen inclusion in the development approval process.

I had hoped that our officials would try to engage the public this year in a discussion of possible changes to the growth policy, arguably the most important issue that will impact residents, our environment and health, and the private sector economy and government budget for decades to come. Instead, officials hunkered down in the cloistered confines of the Council Building in Rockville and the Planning Board auditorium in Silver Spring to hammer out the details of a growth plan so flawed that it cannot possibly control the amount or pace of approvals of new development.

One member of Council was present at a recent gathering of community leaders I attended in a private home, at which Planning Board Chairman Hanson tried valiantly to explain his complicated growth policy recommendations under which the Board will have no legally defensible basis on which to disapprove any and all new development. When Hanson concluded, a woman asked "Would you like to hear what we really think?" The Councilmember in attendance didn't ask for further clarification, leaving us with the distinct impression that they did not want to know what we thought of the proposed growth policy changes.

On the off chance that they or any other member of Council is reading this column, I will now repeat the Civic Federation position on the growth policy, which is the same position we held in 2005: The Council needs to reinstate capacity ceilings, annual limits on the amount of new development the Planning Board can approve, which the Council eliminated four years ago.

I was present when a Planning Board Commissioner publicly remarked that he always sees "the same usual faces" at hearings before that body, a sentiment echoed later by a member of Council who bemoaned the relative lack of participation by various minority communities. As one of those "usual faces" seen at Council and Planning Board hearings and meetings representing the Civic Federation, I can tell them both that I wholeheartedly agree with them. It would be a real benefit to the democratic process, to having a true government of the people, if more people got involved in the government decision making process.

Many of the residents that officials should hear from are simply too busy to participate. Some are from households requiring income from two wage earners, where time away from the job is spent with the kids; some believe their input will have no impact on officials; and still others may have emigrated from countries where to publicly espouse their opinions could have endangered them or their families. Local government is going to have to do a lot better outreach job in order to encourage broader public participation, such as conducting surveys, holding field hearings and engaging in true dialogue with folks in their churches and other places they already gather.

In the absence of participation in government by greater numbers of the public, the Montgomery County Civic Federation for 82 years has offered its services to officials, free of charge, as a conduit through which residents can communicate to government and vice versa. We have our finger on the pulse of the public because we are the public, and our delegates do their level best to fairly present the views of all of the residents of the communities they represent. So, Mr. and Mrs. Elected and Appointed County Official, the next time you are creating a task force or a working group on an issue, or holding a problem solving work session, don't forget to include the public in the form of a Civic Federation member.