

"Federation Corner" column
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For the common good

by Arnold Gordon, MCCF President

This County is at a critical crossroads...a point where we will have to demonstrate that we are capable of restraining our desire to get more out of our government for our personal advantage, political gain, and our own special and selfish interests. In short, we have to consider the common good for a change.

With a \$500 million plus budget deficit in the offing and the strong likelihood of a structural deficit in future years even larger than that, our County Executive, Ike Leggett, has asked us all to tighten our belts. In his recent budget message he has asked for our county employees to make sacrifices, as we all will have to do, to weather the present economic crisis and still provide "essential" public services. For too long the term "essential" public services has too often been interpreted to mean whatever pet political cause or interest we personally feel is more important than any other.

The list of these is endless and will be recognized by most readers who have followed recent events:

- Ethnic interests want subsidies and grants for their own pet causes and institutions, at public expense;
- Public employee unions seek greater control and management over taxpayer paid pension funds with the aim being to extract more and bigger concessions and create less oversight by the public that has to foot the bill;
- Some other public employees seek unjustified disability pensions so they can have tax free earnings, and feed at the public trough until the end of their lives with little regard to the burden they have placed on their fellow citizens;
- Public employees seek unreasonably bigger and better wage and benefit concessions, and to weaken the ability of the government to resist their excessive demands at the bargaining table;
- Developers want greater concessions to the God of density and lesser responsibility to pay for the infrastructure needed to support it, or to make really realistic commitments to affordable housing so desperately needed in the county;
- Our school system resists the county's efforts to obtain true oversight over the 53% of the county budget that the MCPS spends;
- We continue to foul our own nest as we are all guilty of **preaching** environmental controls and then **practicing** environmental degradation, like the travesty of the Inter County Connector, or the myriad ways developers have to reduce their commitment to green space, and expand urban sprawl, in their pursuit of profit – all at the ultimate expense of the larger community;
- Government managers and politicians who attempt to resist transparency of government and input from the communities they serve using a whole panoply of techniques;

- A planning board that arrogantly decides what they feel is best for us all and then devises the way to retain consultants and pack advisory committees, boards and commissions to get the result they seek, and to minimize opposition or dissent by concealment and a whole host of nefarious techniques;
- A schools superintendent who enjoys an obscene salary, flouts the law, mesmerizes a rubber stamp part-time school board into endorsing his every move, and then enters the political arena to openly support one of his puppets for the County Council;
- A Department of Permitting Services that believes its only role is to permit, and not regulate or prevent, egregious abuses that are threatening the livability of our neighborhoods;
- A Park and Planning Commission that for some purposes, like public audit and oversight, resists being considered a county agency; and for other reasons like desiring property tax exemptions and concessions for its employees, resists being considered a state agency.

Essential services means just that. It means those services necessary for: public safety; preserving and maintaining our capital plant, parks and environment; protecting the weakest and most disadvantaged among us; enforcing **ALL** the laws on our books; and, most importantly, resisting the blandishments of the politically powerful to use government to their profit and advantage. In his budget Ike is trying to do just that. We may not agree with every detail but we can't fault the courage it took to present this package.

We need to get behind Ike's budget and we need a County Council that can develop the courage to resist political pressure so as to provide for the common good. Most importantly, we need an electorate that rewards or punishes office holders on how well they adhere to this goal.

The Civic Federation invites the public to attend its meeting on Monday, April 6th at 7:45 p.m. in the County Council Office Building, First floor rear auditorium, at which we will present our annual program on the County Budget.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Montgomery County Civic Federation. The Civic Federation invites civic groups to submit articles for possible publication in this column, by sending them as an email attachment to our editor at waynengoldstein@hotmail.com.