

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - June 11, 2009

The voice of the people

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

Something happened this past Tuesday evening which is I notice is occurring more and more often these days. Ordinary citizens showed up to testify at a hearing before the County Council. The hearing was on four proposed pieces of legislation that would impact the rules relating to businesses being operated out of homes, limit the amount of front yards of homes that can be paved for parking, alter rules relating to storage of unused vehicles on residential properties, and change provisions of the law concerning building permits.

Of course there were "the usual suspects," as one Councilmember refers to us: folks like me whose testimony represents the position of neighborhood citizens groups or homeowner associations, and attorneys expressing the opinions of their clients, and business owners whose livelihood may be impacted by the proposed legislation. But many of the citizens testifying at the hearing on Tuesday were there to voice their personal opinions and concerns to the members of the Council.

It may have been the topic of the hearing that compelled these county residents to take time from their personal lives to appear before their local government representatives. Or it may be that the recent election of President Obama, and his national call to action, has emboldened citizens to become involved in efforts to bring about change. Whatever the reason, I think it is an encouraging sign whenever citizens living in our representative democracy decide they must weigh in on issues that could impact their lives.

As the saying goes, the act of creating legislation is akin to making sausage--messy, often difficult to watch, but one hopes that something good results. So, some residents testified to the Council on their concerns that the proposed laws would negatively affect their businesses, some were afraid new rules would no longer allow them to park their RVs on their own properties, and still others felt the new limitations on amount of paved parking allowed on certain home lots was a direct assault on their property rights. Others opined that the proposed limits on paving of residential properties do not go far enough, and that the character of their neighborhoods, and the value of their homes, is being destroyed by what they termed as blighted properties on which unregistered or unusable vehicles were parked.

As often occurs, some of the folks testifying at the hearing went off topic by asking the Council to address matters which were not directly related to the legislation at hand. In this case, there were several residents who urged the Council to provide stricter housing code enforcement laws to deal with the growing issue of multiple individuals living in single-family homes in their communities. Even though this issue was not one that could be dealt with in the bills under consideration, there is great value in citizens bringing off-topic issues to the attention of their representatives.

Speaking out at a hearing or town hall meeting is the best way we have of informing our elected officials of the issues and concerns which we want them to address, much more effective than writing a letter or sending an email in response to which constituents often receive a standard "thank you for your letter" reply written by a staffer. A letter is better than nothing. But, the act of testifying before government is visceral; it is live, unscripted and personal--officials coming face to face with the people they are representing. I applaud all those who chose to postpone dinner this past Tuesday, find a sitter for the kids, give up watching television, and otherwise alter their schedules to take the time to talk to Council members.

There are other important issues coming before the County Council in the next year and a half which I hope will bring out residents in great numbers. The Council will consider increasing the amount of new development allowed in the master plans for five communities in the county--Germantown, Gaithersburg West (the area surrounding Shady Grove Adventist Hospital and Belward Farm), White Flint (including a section of MD 355 which is now nearly in traffic gridlock), Kensington, and the Takoma/Langley Crossroads area (around the intersection of University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue). Whether those areas retain any of their suburban character or become densely packed mini-cities depends in large part on whether residents in those areas make their opinions known to the members of the County Council.

This fall, as they do every two years, the Council will be considering changes to the growth policy. The growth policy has traditionally controlled the pace of approval of new development projects, linking approvals to the ability of the county government to insure there will be adequate schools, roads, transit and public safety services to accommodate growth before it takes place. Recommendations the Planning Department will make to Council are shocking for the manner in which they would undermine the ability of the county government to insure adequate public facilities and reduce the amount of revenue the county collects from development. The lives of all county residents are impacted by the growth policy. It affects the amount of traffic on our roads, the level of bus and rail service we have, the amount of classroom capacity in schools to accommodate students from new residential developments, and even the response time for police, fire and ambulance services.

The business of local government continues unabated, with elected and appointed officials constantly making decisions that affect our lives whether we communicate with those officials or put on blinders and hope they do right by us. But there is always a better chance that those decisions will reflect the will of the people when citizens make their voices heard.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net