

"Federation Corner" column
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Finally seeing the (red) light

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

Something almost miraculous happened last week. Residents of Bethesda saw the light--by which I mean a new traffic signal light at the intersection of Arlington Road and Montgomery Lane.

Seeking the installation of a traffic light at this location is something that several area residents, myself included, had taken on as a minor mission in life, a quest that ranked somewhere between a hobby and a mild obsession. This quest has gone on so long that I could not honestly tell you how many years ago we began petitioning county government for this much needed pedestrian safety improvement.

The intersection of Arlington Road and Montgomery Lane is an important one to area residents because it is directly adjacent to the entrance to the Bethesda Library. So when the library was remodeled several years ago, let's say seven years, a few neighbors and I decided it was an appropriate time to ask for installation of a signal light at the entrance to the refurbished building. Actually, if truth be told, the library entrance is no longer on Arlington Road.

One of the "improvements" the county made to the Bethesda Library during remodeling was to wall over the entrance, which had been at the front of the building on Arlington Road, and relocate it to the side of the structure facing the parking lot. Yes, it is true that most buildings which house public institutions are designed with their entrances facing the street, as was the case with the library when it first opened in the 1980s. And, yes, the later relocation of the library entrance onto the parking lot seemed to fly in the face of the growing movement to downplay use of the automobile in favor of encouraging walkable and bikeable communities. But, that's another story. Let's get back to the traffic light.

Seven or so years ago, several of us made a formal request of the Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT) to install a traffic signal on Arlington Road at the library. Officials opined the location was too close to the signals at Edgemoor Lane to the north and Elm Street to the south. That may be, we reasoned, but this intersection needs a light because it is on the direct route used by B-CC High School students coming to the library after school. We also showed that the crossing at Montgomery Lane was the most direct route to the library from no less than nine condominium buildings, either planned or existing, and two townhouse subdivisions.

Sorry, said DPWT officials, pedestrians will simply have to cross at the nearby intersections with traffic signals. But they don't, we pleaded, they cross at Montgomery Lane. And it can take so long waiting for a break in traffic that pedestrians are risking life and limb to dash across the busy arterial. Besides, we said, a signal at this intersection is recommended in the 1994 area master plan. Still the folks at DPWT held firm that the location did not warrant a traffic signal under their guidelines.

Officials did tell us that they could install pedestrian flags at the location. This is a rather lame system involving buckets, located on both sides of a pedestrian crosswalk painted onto the street, which hold small red flags on about two foot long sticks. The theory is that pedestrians will grab one of these flags out of the bucket and hold it high above their heads when crossing the street, to alert motorists of their presence. No thanks, we said, it will just give drivers a better target to aim at.

How about a pedestrian-activated crossing signal, we queried, like the one on Wisconsin Avenue in Friendship Heights? These are single lights that slowly blink yellow most of the time, and when a

pedestrian pushes a button located on the sidewalk they blink faster and faster until changing to red to stop traffic. But DPWT officials stated they dislike these signals, which can be more dangerous than no signal at all. Drivers are not accustomed to regularly stopping at them and often motor through them when red, yet they give pedestrians false confidence that traffic will actually stop. Then, after having been told how much they dislike them, DPWT officials relented and installed one.

The pedestrian-activated crossing signal was in place for the last five years or so--another guess as to the timing, since none of us can remember the exact date. In that time, a new County Executive has taken office and Mr. Leggett has made it clear that pedestrian safety is a priority of his administration. Also in that time we have had to admit to DoT officials that they were right about drivers not noticing the signal.

There have been many close calls with pedestrians nearly being hit by cars breezing through the signal when red. We also noticed that the signal took so long to activate that pedestrians often gave up on waiting and crossed, only to have the light turn red after they had reached the other side of the street. And we realized that the pedestrian-activated signal was no use in stopping traffic to allow vehicles to enter onto Arlington Road from Montgomery Lane, unless someone jumped out of their car and pushed the button to activate the signal. Again we asked DoT for a full traffic signal on a regular cycle at the intersection, and were told they would conduct a study.

Then we heard nothing...until last week, with no fanfare or notification to any of us, county workers arrived and installed a full traffic signal at the intersection of Arlington Road and Montgomery Lane. I guess the point of this story is that a small group of committed individuals can bring about a change, if they've got about seven years to blow on the process.

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