

"Federation Corner" column

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### **Getting the public involved**

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, Planning and Land Use Committee

During the county election three years ago, County Executive Ike Leggett and many of the current members of the County Council ran on a promise to make government more transparent and accountable, and to increase citizen participation in decision making. Since that election, the Council and County Executive have each held a series of Town Hall meetings with the public. These meetings provide opportunities for citizens to explain issues of importance to them and their communities, and to ask questions of their political leaders.

Listening to residents is an important aspect of citizen inclusion in government decision making. But it needs to be accompanied by communication in the other direction, too. Our officials need to consider how to better educate the public about decisions under consideration, and explore new ways of sharing information with residents in an effective and timely manner.

This past week I was presented with two examples that demonstrated the need to improve government communication with the public. From the residents' perspective, the first case is an example of a poor decision about whether to inform local citizens associations first about a pending decision affecting their community, or to take the issue to the media as a means of informing the public. The matter concerns a possible public-private partnership being considered by the Department of Parks which would allow operation of a for-profit business in a park near Potomac.

The Department of Parks chose to first go to the media to announce an upcoming public meeting planned with Potomac residents to discuss the possible partnership being considered for a park in their community. Members of the local citizens association felt they should not have learned of the meeting by reading a local newspaper, but rather the Department should have contacted them before going to the media with the announcement. Since the meeting is only the first step in the decision making process, and there will be plenty of time for citizen input, it probably matters little in this case whether the media or the local citizens association was the first to be informed.

The other case involves the drafting and approval of design guidelines for the redevelopment of Germantown. The master plan for the area referred to as the Germantown Employment Area recently underwent revision, and the new version was approved by the County Council this past July. The plan rezoned properties to permit 10,800 more housing units to be built than currently exist in downtown Germantown, and enough new commercial space to allow 25,800 more jobs to be created than currently exist in the area.

For every master plan revision until this one, a set of design guidelines has been included in the document approved by the County Council. These guidelines do not affect how tall buildings can be, since that is a standard imposed by the zoning imposed on properties. The design guidelines are recommendations more concerned with the look of redevelopment, when and if it occurs, and can have a major impact on creating a comfortable, livable community. For example, what is the desired location for public open space or a new park? Or, is a single building desirable on a large parcel or should redevelopment with several smaller buildings connected by walkways be encouraged?

This past July, for the first time, a master plan revision approved by Council--the Germantown Employment Area Plan revision--did not include a set of design guidelines. Instead, the design guidelines are being drafted by the Planning Department staff and will not be sent to the Council for approval, but will be approved by the Planning Board only. If allowed, this case will set the precedent for the manner in which the design guidelines for all future master plans will be approved.

So where does the issue of public participation in government decision making enter the picture? The change in process alone is an issue worth discussing with the public: since the Council is the only body granted authority under state law to approve zoning, shouldn't they also be the ones to approve the design guidelines applied to properties as they are redeveloped under that zoning? But more important at this point is the timing of the process.

The Planning Department staff states they have been conferring with stakeholders in the Germantown area on the drafting of the design guidelines, mostly the owners and developers who control properties in the area. The first and only public meeting, to inform and educate Germantown residents of the draft guidelines that will impact the future look of the community, is scheduled for November 30. And the Planning Board hearing on the proposed design guidelines is scheduled for December 3. This means that citizens associations in the area will have a whopping three days to discuss the proposed design guidelines, then consider and vote a position on them and write testimony to deliver at the Planning Board's public hearing!

This is clearly an instance in which one aspect of involving the public in government decision making, notably the timing for education of the public on the issue, is inadequate and inexcusable. In fact, I am not sure how the Planning Department has chosen to inform Germantown residents of the November 30 meeting, or whether the local media has been notified. It is one thing for government officials to claim they are involving the public in decision making, but to make good on this claim the public must be fully informed on the issues and be given sufficient notice of their opportunity for input that they can schedule it into their lives.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*