

"Federation Corner" column
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Sacrificing Our Environment to the Budget?

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Budget considerations have become the latest excuse to abandon caring for the most basic components of our environmental health and the natural environment, seemingly under the assumption they don't matter as much to our citizens as promoting growth, business and just about any kind of development. We make a good show of taking climate change seriously. Our political leaders appoint task forces and advisory committees which develop laudable plans for achieving sustainability, clean energy, green infrastructure, stream protection strategies, forest conservation, air and water quality. Then those same leaders abandon or ignore the recommendations the advisory panels issue, particularly when the budget gets tight as it is now.

Early in the budget process, County Executive Ike Leggett drastically reduced care, maintenance and replanting of trees in the County right-of-way, eliminating all replanting despite recent attention to the value of street trees in sequestering carbon and cooling impervious surfaces. The budget wasn't much to begin with--a mere \$250,000--and although the Executive has a Forest Conservation Advisory Committee, he never bothered to inform them he sought this cut, or seek their advice in making the decision. Our approximately 450,000 roadside trees are highly valued by residents and while we will still cut them down and prune them, we won't be replanting them.

Parks, park maintenance and safety are also under severe attack in the current budget. Montgomery County's award winning parks system, totaling nearly 34,000 acres and divided into 407 parks, ranks high when people decide to locate to Montgomery County. Our parklands offer infinite variety, are available to all economic levels of society, and in tough economic times are especially valuable as places for family activities. Proposed cuts to the Parks budget are especially deep. Yet the County Executive's latest presumed budget cutting proposal is to take the Park Police out of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPCC) and merge it with the County Police Department. Trained to respond only to park related issues, our Park Police are under the supervision of the Department of Parks which is also charged with stewarding County parkland. Severing this union makes absolutely no sense. Park Police presence on horseback and bicycle patrols assure visitors they are safe and that concerns and threats will be addressed. This is especially important to visitors in down county parklands.

One wonders if this is not another attempt on the part of politicians to gain power over public parkland. Last year the County Council and Executive wasted a large amount of tax dollars compelling staff in both the Parks and the Recreation Departments to engage in endless meetings trying to support their collective wish to take over Parks from the Commission. It didn't play out as they hoped, largely due to public outcry. In the case of merging Park Police, there has been no analysis to support the assumption of savings, and no public process to support such a far reaching proposal which cannot be achieved anyway without changing State Law. So, how can this help the current budget shortfall?

Sacrificing our environmental well being does not stop at County borders. Witness the fiasco in Annapolis this session over implementing regulations to achieve the goals of the *Stormwater Management Act of 2007*, which was passed unanimously by the General Assembly. Instead of putting their money into meeting the subsequent regulations that will diminish storm water pollution fouling our drinking water and killing the Chesapeake Bay, the development community instead funded lobbyists to roll back the regulations and forestall compliance. Our State legislators bought it. Requirements for developers have been weakened.

The things that really make us feel better as we struggle through the economic downturn are being taken away little by little. The natural places that refresh our spirits will not be given the care they require. Clean air and water goals, bolstered by the urgency of climate change threats, are now being compromised. That same County Executive, while looking to cut the Parks budget, has failed to produce the promised Forest Conservation Law changes that would stop the clear cutting of smaller lots that is now rampant in our older neighborhoods where large trees have had time to mature and provide invaluable canopy cover. While we may have once put it off, we can no longer afford to overlook our "environmental" budget.

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