

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - May 20, 2010

Inaction an election year norm

by Jim Humphrey
Chair, MCCF Planning & Land Use

This fall voters will go to the polls to elect the officials who will lead the county through the upcoming four years--a County Executive, and nine people who will comprise the next County Council. And since it is an election year, county residents can expect the normal paucity of action on key issues from our current crop of elected officials, as they each attempt to avoid publicly putting their foot in their mouth or taking an action that could be taken by voters for weakness or stupidity.

But shouldn't this lack of action on critical quality of life issues provide at least a partial basis for residents' decisions on whether or not to vote for any incumbent running for reelection?

Practically the first piece of legislation introduced in this Council was a bill sponsored by Council member George Leventhal (D.-At large), which would eliminate the ability for developers to buy out of the requirement to provide a small percentage of Moderately Priced Dwelling Units in each new residential development in the county. The bill, and a similar one introduced at the request of County Executive Ike Leggett, has been held up in the Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee by Chairman Mike Knapp (D.-Dist. 2). One can only assume that the development industry doesn't favor this legislation, and the campaign contributions which flow to most county politicians from that special interest wield significant power in affecting Council decisions.

In similar fashion, legislation courageously sponsored by Council member Marc Elrich (D.-At Large) would have strengthened the definition of "green area" in county zoning law. Until it was brought to their attention by the Civic Federation, the Council was apparently unaware that for years the Planning Board has allowed required green area--the percentage of the site of a construction project that must be free from buildings and vehicular access surfaces--to be provided on the roofs of buildings or at grade over top of underground parking structures.

Never mind that the first four words of the current definition of green area are "an area of land." Never mind that green area provided over underground parking is essentially a planter box which does not allow rainfall to be absorbed into the water table to replenish the headwater springs of local streams. And never mind that Planning Board Chair Royce Hanson has publicly stated the increased density of development allowed in some areas of the county must be offset by decreased negative impact on the natural environment. PHED Committee Chair Knapp has chosen to hold this legislation in committee, too, and prevent a Council vote on which members could be judged during the upcoming campaign season.

When negative impact from development on the Ten Mile Creek watershed threatened to stop approval of any more construction in the Clarksburg area, PHED Chair Knapp rushed to appoint a Water Quality Working Group to study whether implementation of Stage 4 of the Clarksburg Master Plan could go forward. The group's report and recommendations, due to Council by the end of February, have not yet been released. Don't hold your breath...it's an election year.

The Council vote on Knapp's legislation to weaken and undermine the county's historic preservation law will probably be put off until after the September Primary Elections, too. Wouldn't want Council members to take a position on a controversial issue right before an election, would we?

In 2007, at the request of the Planning Board, legislation was introduced in Council to strengthen the county's Forest Conservation Law. Don't expect a vote on this one before the fall elections--it is being held up in the Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy, and Environment Committee chaired by Council President Nancy Floreen (D.-At Large). After all, trees don't vote or make campaign contributions.

County Executive Leggett complained in 2007 that the growth policy transportation test applied to new construction projects, which calculates whether or not developers will have to reduce vehicle traffic generated by their projects or pay a fee in lieu, "may not adequately reflect the (traffic) congestion that is experienced in the County today" and "is difficult to understand and thus is not transparent to County residents." With the help of a consultant hired in November of last year, the County Executive in March submitted to Council a simpler, more rational alternative. But Council President Floreen was quoted in another local newspaper as saying the Council would not review Leggett's proposal for a "good long time," possibly not before the November election. What a surprise.

The County Executive is not exempt from election year inaction on critical issues, either. Don't hold your breath awaiting a decision to be announced on a new site for the North County Bus Maintenance Depot (the site initially chose next to the Clarksburg jail, a site with a 10% impervious surface limit, was apparently found unsuitable for a large-scale RideOn bus parking lot...go figure). Neighbors of any selected new site who vote might not appreciate the idea of living down the road from the traffic, noise and fumes generated by such a facility.

The County Executive's much touted 3-1-1 Call System was to have simplified citizen access to government to a three digit telephone number connected to a county call center. But the start-up of 3-1-1 Leggett promised would occur soon after his December 2006 swearing in has yet to occur, with no update on efforts to solve ongoing technical glitches. And Leggett's CountyStat program, marketed as a solution to waste and duplication of effort in county government that would result in huge cost savings, has failed to live up to the hype with no public explanation of the as-yet meager results.

As humorist Will Rogers used to say, "The short memories of American voters is what keeps our politicians in office." But I wouldn't want to take a position on that. After all, it's an election year.

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