

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Portable toilets to be removed from county parks**

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

Did you know that portable toilets are scheduled to be removed from county parks starting on June 30? It was reported on a local radio station last week. You missed that report? Well, you're not alone because so did most residents of the county. And, apparently no member of the County Council committee with jurisdiction over the Parks Department knew that the Department has cancelled the porta-john contract, either.

The day after the County Council approved the budget for fiscal year starting July 1, a news item posted on the WTOP radio station website quoted Parks Department Public Relations staffer Kelli Holsendolph as saying the budget crunch has gotten so bad that some of the basics, like portable bathrooms, had to go. In the May 28 news item, WTOP's Kate Ryan reported that "dumping the portable bathrooms will save the county more than \$150,000 a year in renting, cleaning and maintenance costs." You can access the item on the internet at: <http://www.wtopnews.com/index.php?nid=25&sid=1968174>

The odd thing is, there's no press release on this issue posted on the Parks Department website...in fact, there is no mention that portable toilets are scheduled to be pulled. Yet a call to the porta-john rental company that has the contract with Montgomery County Parks confirmed that, starting next Wednesday, the company will begin pulling portable toilets from all Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) parks and ball field areas in Montgomery County, except those units located in Enterprise facility areas.

What is an enterprise facility? It is a facility run by M-NCPPC that provides recreational or cultural activities that are operated in a manner similar to private business enterprises. Enterprise facilities include: Black Hill boats; Lake Needwood boats; Little Bennett campground; South Germantown mini-golf and splash playground; regional park shelter rentals at Needwood, Black Hill, South Germantown, Cabin John and Wheaton; and the lodging and facility rentals available at Rockwood Manor, Seneca Lodge, and Woodlawn Manor house.

So, in other words, if a park patron pays to rent a paddle boat or a campsite, then the Parks Department believes they should have access to a portable toilet. But hold your horses...users pay to rent soccer fields, too. So shouldn't they be given the same access to porta-johns provided boaters and campers? But let's not get sidetracked from the real issue. At its core, this is not so much a matter of equity--of who "deserves" to have access to a porta-potty--as it is a matter of public health and safety. I'm sure residents would rather see the county pay to continue the contract with the porta-john company than go back to the good ol' days when basketball court and soccer field users in our local parks answered the call of nature in the woods, where hikers and family pets risked stepping right in the middle of the whole issue...so to speak.

By the way, how about the alleged \$150,000 savings mentioned in the WTOP news item? No one at our Parks Department office in Silver Spring was able to confirm the total number of rental toilets in county parks at present, or how many are targeted for removal, or which ones they propose to retain in place. However, based on financial data obtained from M-NCPPC headquarters in Riverdale, the estimated annual cost of the contract for the porta-johns to be removed from Montgomery parks is only about half the figure reported by Montgomery Parks Department.

Why would our Parks Department claim a bigger cost savings, nearly double what the data shows, from cancellation of the rental contract for some portable toilets in county parks? For that matter, why would the department seem to be keeping the entire issue such a big secret, apparently only releasing the news to a single reporter with one local radio station? In addition, according to the porta-john company, they are willing to allow neighborhood citizen associations or community groups to retain units in their local park by renting them at the

same reduced price the company has charged the county. Why hasn't the Parks Department released this news to communities where units are scheduled to be removed?

I know the fiscal picture for the county government is bleak, and the jobs of some 1,100 employees--about 10% of the county workforce--are going to be eliminated. So maybe we can get creative with this porta-john thing. How about corporate sponsors? Maybe we could have the PEPCO porta-potties at Parklawn Park, or the Sear's sani-johns at Spencerville Local Park. Or maybe our Parks Department officials could realize that removal of portable toilets from local parks and ball fields amounts to a step backward in dealing with a serious health and safety issue, and find another way to cut \$75,000 a year from their budget. They might start by cutting the budget for their Public Relations office, which doesn't seem to be providing sufficient bang for the buck...it certainly hasn't kept the public very well informed on the porta-john removal issue.

*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)*