

"Federation Corner" column
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Pooches must pay to play

by Jim Humphrey
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There is good news and bad news regarding the Parks Department's budget situation.

The good news is that the Department has decided not to remove portable toilets from county parks and ball fields...at least for the time being. Like good little bureaucrats, the Parks folks have warned that if they have to take further budget cuts this year, then they could once again consider canceling the contract and having the sanitary conveniences removed.

The bad news, at least for some dog owners, is that the same crew that brought us the "Big Porta-Potty Scare of 2010" has hatched another budget related plan. This time the idea is to charge dog owners \$40 a year for their pooches to use any of the five off-leash doggy play parks in the county, and \$5 a year for each additional dog from the same household. Hey, if they started charging parents \$40 a year for their kids to use the swings and slides in local parks, they could make a killing at my neighborhood. But I best not give them ideas.

Each enrolled canine will be issued a colored collar tag to show they are entitled to use the now-exclusive "members only" doggy playgrounds. And the Park Police will be directed to issue tickets to owners whose pooches are not displaying the required identifying tag.

I am sure this new program will generate an enormous amount of new revenue for the Parks Department, considering the price they will pay to contract for making the collar tags, and the cost to mail them out, and the employee time to administer the program, and the police time spent enforcing it. With luck, the cash infusion might pay for the cost of maintaining the chain link fences surrounding the five dog play parks.

I assume at this point everyone knows the truly bad budgetary news is that a year and a half ago we nearly saw the collapse of the entire world economy. In the United States, the recovery has been slower than the experts predicted. Still, we are better off here than in Europe where entire countries, like Greece, are poised to default on their loan repayments.

So I guess it should not have surprised us that our county government would be hit hard, too. After all, our \$4 billion plus annual budget rivals that of some small third-world countries. In response, some fees and charges have been increased, like the cell phone tax and fuel energy tax (that whopper of an increase hit us in last month's electric bill). And the cost of metered public parking has risen in many communities, too. But this has been balanced out by a rise in Metro rail and bus fares, which should serve to stave off any rush to use mass transit as the cost of private vehicle usage rises.

On the bright side, Montgomery County does not have any slot machine parlors located here. Oh, wait...there aren't any slot machine parlors anywhere in Maryland. The legalized gambling initiative, which was to have been a budgetary savior and underwritten new school construction throughout the State, has yet to get off the ground.

And while we are on the topic of delayed revenue generating schemes, weren't we told by former County Executive Doug Duncan that our recycling program, begun in earnest in the 1990s, would cost money to start up but would soon turn a profit for the county? The last time I checked, the county was still paying a company to haul away our recycled aluminum cans, which I've heard they then turn into fencing and sell back to the county.

I guess everything is relative, in the final analysis. And we are certainly in better fiscal shape here in Montgomery County than in many places throughout the United States. The entire state of California is on the brink of bankruptcy. Some counties in the country have decided road maintenance costs are too great, and are removing asphalt and reverting to cheaper gravel surface roads. And in response to widespread real estate foreclosures, city officials in Detroit are considering demolishing all development on up to 4,000 acres of their downtown and using the land for urban farming to help residents feed themselves.

Looking at the bigger picture, I guess things are relatively rosy in good old MoCo. We have not had an earthquake that destroyed buildings and homes, forcing huge numbers of people to live in temporary tent housing (although the 3.6 magnitude temblor centered near Germantown on July 16 was a surprise). We do not have a volcano with an unpronounceable name spewing ash and shutting down air traffic in the skies above the county. And we have not had a tsunami, nor are we likely to in the foreseeable future.

We also haven't had any underwater oil well disaster to foul our waters, killing a local fishing economy. Oh, sure, there are so many toxic chemicals in the Potomac River that fish are being born with both male and female sex organs. But you could still catch and eat them, if you dared.

So what if dog owners will now have to pay to let their pooches romp off-leash in county sponsored doggy playgrounds? It is a small price to pay for being able to live in Montgomery County. What really concerns me is what money-grubbing scheme our officials will come up with next. Maybe coin operated street lights? Again, I best not give them ideas.

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