

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - August 12, 2010

Future White Oak police station redesigned

by Jim Humphrey
Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

At the end of July, county designers with the Department of General Services announced that they have revised the plans for a new Third District Police Station to be built in White Oak. The new facility is slated to be constructed on a 12.8 acre parcel of land located in the northeast quadrant of the intersection of New Hampshire Avenue and Columbia Pike (US 29), which was purchased by the county government for \$6.192 million.

Residents of the neighborhoods near the site were presented with the original proposal for the project at a public meeting late last year. That version sited the new building closer to the adjacent single family homes and, claiming security concerns, called for the removal of many of the trees from around the planned building and erection of a security wall just eight feet from the nearest homeowner's property line. And, even though the proposed police facility would occupy only part of the site, the county announced that it planned to save money during construction by clear cutting trees on the entire site at the same time, in preparation for possible future development of the remainder of the parcel.

Representatives of the nearby neighborhood citizen associations related their concerns to the members of the Montgomery County Civic Federation Executive Committee in January of this year. The associations asked for MCCF support in seeking a wider buffer between the planned police station and its nearest neighbors and in requesting that there be 100 percent forest conservation on the site, which is located in the environmentally sensitive Paint Branch watershed.

The neighbors were also urging the county government to bring forward any plans for use of the remainder of the land at the same time as the police station proposal, so that the community could understand and weigh in on development plans for the entire parcel during a single approval process. However, county officials asserted then, as now, that they cannot comply with this request, since the decision has not been made whether to use the rest of the site for an affordable housing project or for a government office building, perhaps for use by the county Department of Health and Human Services.

At the monthly MCCF meeting in March, delegates approved a resolution supporting the adjacent neighborhoods' request for changes in the planned siting of the police station, to increase the forested buffer between the planned station and nearby homes, and seeking 100 percent forest conservation on site. In the mean time, designers with the Department of General Services had agreed to expand the width of the buffer between the project and nearby home properties from eight feet to 33 feet.

The Civic Federation position was submitted in testimony to the Planning Board when the Board considered the plans for the police station during its May 27 session. By that time, General Services officials had agreed to increase the width of the buffer from 33 to 50 feet, but refused to budge on location of the proposed building or agree to preservation of forested areas on the parcel.

Planning Board Commissioners voiced their concern that county government officials were not responding adequately to community concerns. And Commissioner Norman Dreyfuss said the proposal was "the worst abuse by the county of their mandatory referral process, and no private developer could have ever gotten away with it." After the Board rejected the proposed plans and recommended that changes be made, the folks in the Division of Building Design and Construction of the Department of General Services went back to the drawing boards, literally, to redesign the police station project.

The latest version of the plan retains the original design for the new police station but relocates it nearer the center of the site, allowing for a 200 foot wide forested buffer to the north and west to shield the adjacent residential community. The plan now also calls for 100 percent of the required reforestation to be done on site, which will still leave enough room for a future county office building. Department of General Services designers worked on the redesign with Planning Department staffers, who believe the new proposal is responsive to all of the Planning Board recommendations. They are expected to hold a public meeting in September to unveil the new design to community residents, and then hope to present the reworked proposal to the Planning Board in October.

Now see, county officials, that wasn't so hard, was it? When your boss, County Executive Ike Leggett, got elected in 2006, he claimed that transparency, accountability and citizen inclusion would be hallmarks of his administration. So you should expect to run into problems when you covertly design a public building project, and then unveil it to impacted residents like it is a done deal. You were lucky this time, because citizen opposition and Planning Board rejection only delayed this project's schedule about six months. But had you acted in an open and transparent manner from the start, and included county residents in your decision making as the stakeholders they are, you could have saved yourself a lot of time and effort. And time is money...taxpayers' money, in this case.

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