

"Federation Corner" column
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The winds of change are blowing

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In the next four years, the Montgomery County Council and County Executive will face some tough challenges. And as they have for more than 85 years, the volunteers of the Civic Federation, who represent neighborhood citizen associations as well as homeowner and condo associations from all across the county, will be partnering with local officials to solve the problems we face.

One important function of the MCCF is that of two-way communications facilitator, both helping to transmit citizen concerns to the appropriate officials and providing information on local government decisions, programs and processes to residents.

First and foremost among the challenges confronting us is the depressed economy and the stress it has placed on the functioning of the county government. Our county government must continue to partner with the State and Federal government to help individuals at risk of losing their homes. Last year, thousands of houses in the county went into foreclosure proceedings, with banks still holding many back from sale on the auction block for fear of further weakening an already stressed housing market. Many of these foreclosures came as a result of homeowners losing jobs; so replacement of lost jobs must be near the top of the county priorities list.

The MCCF can help in developing cost effective ways that the government can better support our local businesses, which comprise over half of the economic activity in the county. Large economic development grants and property tax waivers to mega-corporations, to perhaps create a few hundred new jobs, might be better spent on local businesses run by county residents which could create or retain thousands of jobs for the same amount of government outlay.

Next among the challenges we face is the county budget. Some fiscal relief came to the county from the Federal government in this current fiscal year, in the form of infrastructure and jobs recovery funding. And a good deal of belt tightening was done by our officials. The size of the county employee workforce was cut by one-third, some services were scaled back, and rainy day funds were expended. But many of the solutions used to balance the budget for the current fiscal year were one time options, and cannot be repeated in the upcoming years. The MCCF stands ready to help institute organizational reform and improve efficiency, while insuring that government can still provide an acceptable level of services to our residents.

While other challenges may pale in comparison to the first two, they still involve critical decisions that will greatly influence the quality of life for county residents.

A complete rewrite of the county zoning laws is underway at the Planning Department and County Council. The Federation will actively participate in this process, particularly to insure that new residential zoning rules still work to preserve our existing neighborhoods, the new agricultural zoning continues to protect the county's Agricultural Reserve, and industrial zoning rules retain and strengthen this important land use. In addition, the MCCF will continue to examine whether changes might be made to the newly created CR (commercial/residential) mixed use zone, to insure that community serving retail can be retained along with the jobs it provides.

Our county government also faces some choices concerning future growth. The current work program for the upcoming County Council envisions consideration and vote on rewrites of the master plans for nine

individual county communities, in addition to a revision of the county Master Plan for Highways and the Housing Chapter of the General Plan (the county's overall master plan). However, the growth policy has never addressed the 800 pound gorilla in the room: what is the appropriate scale for the county?

Instead of instituting a true policy on future growth, the Council has chosen to rename what was called the growth policy as the "subdivision staging process" or, in layman's terms, an appropriate rate to approve new development already allowed by the thirty or so master plans for communities in the county.

The Council must be mindful that the amount of growth that can be zoned into master plan rewrites must be weighed against the amount of infrastructure--schools, roads, transit and public safety services--needed to support that growth. And the county government's ability to fund supportive infrastructure will be severely limited for many years to come. So, as the county continues to grow in the near term, the developers who profit from growth will need to pay a greater share of the bill for infrastructure needed to accommodate their developments.

Finally, the Civic Federation stands ready to help address a myriad of other concerns, from replacement of aging infrastructure (particularly water, sewer and gas pipes), to adequacy of public safety services, to the need to improve processes to include citizens in the decisions of government. And, as always, a priority at MCCF is aiding residents and neighborhood citizen groups to navigate the processes of local government to find solutions to individual and community problems.

I encourage residents to urge your neighborhood citizen association, condo or homeowners association to join the Civic Federation, and send delegates to our monthly meetings. Working together as partners with our local government, the volunteers of the Montgomery County Civic Federation will continue to build on the work done over the past 85 years, and strive to preserve and improve the quality of life for ourselves and for future generations.

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