

"Federation Corner" column
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Reorganizing county government

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The program for the February Montgomery County Civic Federation meeting was on the Organizational Reform Commission (ORC) Final Report. The eight citizens who served as members of the Commission were appointed seven months ago, four by the County Council and four by County Executive Ike Leggett. Four of the Commission members--Co-Chairs Vernon Ricks, Jr. and Richard Wegman, Susan Heltemes, and Joan Fidler--attended the Federation meeting to discuss their report, which was released January 31.

According to the Final Report, the ORC was charged with "recommending changes that would decrease County expenditures by eliminating service duplication and increasing the efficiency of County operation." Those who want to read the 75-page ORC Final Report can access it, and a link to the Commission's webpage, through the "Public Finance Committee Current Issues" page on the Federation's website at www.montgomerycivic.org.

Of major fiscal significance, the ORC Final Report states: "Across the five agencies (County government, Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and the Housing Opportunities Commission), total tax-supported personnel costs represent 82% of the overall budget." At the MCCF meeting, Commission members reported that over the past decade salaries in the private sector rose 27% and benefits rose 44%, for personnel of other counties in the nation salaries rose 30% and benefits 67%, and for Montgomery County personnel salaries rose 42% and benefits 125%.

Commissioners did not feel they had sufficient time or information to make specific recommendations concerning appropriate salary or benefits levels for county personnel. But they did note in their Report: "If a 1% reduction in salaries were to be achieved across all five tax-supported agencies, the total annual saving would be \$22.9 million." They chose instead to make recommendations about the collective bargaining system of negotiations between the county and employee unions. In general, the Report praises the quality of the county government workforce, and cautions against changes that might adversely impact employee morale and, as a result, efficiency.

The ORC Final Report contains 28 recommendations in all:

Structural and Organizational Changes

Boards, Committees and Commissions

- Accelerate the timeline for citizen review process that periodically evaluates the County's boards, committees, and commissions.
- Increase use of the Regional Services Center's citizen advisory boards and the Office of Community Partnership, in lieu of creating new citizen boards or committee.
- Reorganize the Commission for Women.
- Reorganize the Human Rights Commission.
- Modernize the property management system for the Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF) Office.
- Reorganize the Criminal Justice Coordinating Commission

Workforce Training

- Enable the County Workforce Investment Board to coordinate oversight of the workforce grants awarded by the County Executive and Council.

Legal Services

- Increase efforts to substitute costly contracted legal services with in-house expertise.
- Form a Task Force to create a consolidated Montgomery County Law Office that would serve multiple agencies.

Housing

- Establish a Task Force on a Montgomery Housing and Redevelopment Department, to begin the process of blending the Housing Opportunities Commission and the Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

Parks and Recreation

- Transfer all Parks Department's "user services" to the Executive Branch, as part of Department of Recreation. Retain responsibility for park planning, environmental stewardship, and ownership of park property at M-NCPPC.

Park Police and County Police

- Incorporate Park Police into Montgomery County Police Department.

Procurement

- Create a Shared Service Center for purchasing goods and services that would serve all County agencies with a centralized procurement schedule and catalogue.

Real Estate and Facilities

- Centralize real estate and facilities functions that are now handled separately by each of the County agencies.

The 311 System

- Consolidate information distribution and call center activities by expanding the County government's 311 system so that it also serves the other agencies.

Information Technology

- Consolidate the County's information technology leadership into a single independent Chief Information Officer.

Liquor Control

- Pursue options for establishing an independent "revenue authority" to be responsible for the Department of Liquor Control, thereby generating more revenue for the General Fund and removing it from the Executive Branch.

Procedural and Operational Changes

Collective Bargaining

- Make the process more transparent and increase opportunities for public input.
- Modify criteria for arbitrators to use in addressing an impasse.
- Change the method for selecting the arbitrator.
- Make the scope of bargaining consistent for all County agencies.

School Funding

- Seek changes in the State's Maintenance of Effort law.
- Seek changes in the State Education Article to authorize the Council to approve or reject the economic provisions of the MCPS collective bargaining agreement.

Information Technology

- Embolden all County departments and agencies to move in the direction of converting to Cloud and Thin Client computing.
- Expand the outsourcing of "seat management" to MCPS and Montgomery College.
- Consolidate major IT platforms and provide for a migration path.

Liquor Control

- Expand contracting of warehouse night-loading operations at Department of Liquor Control to all warehouse operations, and improve retail services.
- Contract out for a financial and performance audit of Department of Liquor Control.

The Commission's webpage contains links to the reports of two past commissions and one task force (released in 1988, 1989 and 1991), which were also charged with reviewing the efficiency and effectiveness of county government, making recommendations for restructuring, and examining future budget needs. Perhaps this listing of past studies was done as a form of cautionary tale, asking the question "if the recommendations of these past groups had been followed, would we be in the dire fiscal situation we are today?"

There is reason for optimism that changes may result this time around. The County Council passed a resolution setting goals for implementing the recommendations of this most recent reorganization study. By February 28, the County Executive must either submit the Commission's reorganization plan, or an alternative plan that will produce the same level of savings, to the Council, or inform them why no plan is necessary. And the Council has tasked itself with holding one or more public hearings on the plan by March 31.

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