

"Federation Corner" column
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County government organically fails to be transparent

by Peggy Dennis
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We will likely be losing an irreplaceable down-county organic farm to soccer fields, through a process that has not met the County's standards for transparency.

The facts: The Board of Education (BoE) proposed, at the urging of the County Executive, to end their longstanding relationship with a small organic farmer, and lease the 20 acre "future school site" on Brickyard Road in Potomac to the County. The County would, in turn, send out a "Request for Proposals" to privately run athletic groups (Montgomery Soccer, Inc.) to find a "partner" to lease the land from the County and develop it into playing fields. Simple action, you might say. Anything but!

The BoE scheduled a vote on Tuesday, March 8, allotting 30 minutes of time for public testimony on the issue with a limit of two minutes per speaker. The farmer, Nick Maravel, learned that his lease was in question only when the BoE's agenda was made public late Thursday afternoon, March 3. After the hearing, the BoE voted to extend the lease to the farmer for one more growing season, and to transfer the land to the County on a 10-year lease.

This episode raises two issues. First is the lack of transparency. Montgomery County prides itself on the transparency of local government and in working with local communities whenever changes in land use are contemplated. But not this time. This time the deal appears to have been done behind closed doors, without prior notification or public discussion. Montgomery Soccer, Inc. was, apparently, advised months ago to discuss the proposal with the surrounding neighborhood, but it chose to keep the matter secret. And people certainly care about this issue. Unlike most public hearings at which elected officials complain that they always see the same old civic activists, Tuesday's hearing was packed with many new faces: fellow organic farmers, agricultural educators, supportive neighbors and appreciative customers.

The second issue is the loss of an important and unique resource. Perhaps MCPS or the BoE told the Executive that the Brickyard site was "just being farmed with corn and soybeans". Was he told the whole truth? The land has been farmed by Nick Maravel for 31 years, and certified as "organic" for most of that time. (Full disclosure: Nick is a neighbor and friend.) It takes a minimum of three years following rigorous procedures to qualify for organic certification. The procedures used in successful organic farming result, after some years, in a soil that is rich in organic material, has more beneficial microorganisms and takes and holds more rain water than soils that are farmed in what is now called "conventional" agricultural techniques in which crops are sprayed with pesticides and herbicides, heavily dosed with petroleum-based fertilizers, and irrigated frequently to make up for the poorer permeability of the soil.

Nick's Organic Farm is unique. Because it is located miles from farms that use conventional methods, it is free from insect-borne and airborne pollen from genetically engineered (GMO) crops, and thus can produce uncontaminated organic crops and seeds. Such an organic farm is an irreplaceable treasure in the down-

county, one that should be recognized and cherished. Moreover, because of Nick's long association with agricultural scientists, he has become an icon and nationally recognized educator within the organic farming community. What better person to steward the land being held in trust for a future educational use?

The County's planning objectives encourage locally grown produce and agriculture. Organic farming is not something you can just stop in one place and start up again in another location. Pulling the rug out from under one of our champion small farmers will send a message that neither small businesses nor farming are valued.

Allowing Mr. Marvel another year's lease, as the Board decided to do, costs nothing: any change in land use such as this will require many months before ground could be broken. The proposal will have to go before the Planning Department and the Planning Commission, go through traffic and parking analyses with the Department of Transportation, and be vetted by the Department of Environmental Protection before the required permits could be issued. Will it even meet the County's stringent new stormwater and sediment control requirements? Or will the requirement that playing fields have 60 parking places per field create an unacceptable amount of stormwater runoff into already stressed Rock Run?

Renewing the lease will also provide time to explore alternative sites available in Potomac for the development of playing fields. For example, a smaller MCPS "future school site" also on Brickyard Road and backing onto the River Falls Swimming and Tennis Club has nothing on it but second growth forest. That site would allow for the development of several playing fields, and would surely be more compatible and acceptable to the affected community than having a "SoccerPlex Junior" in their back yard. There may be other alternatives available, or it might be found that all sites have more valuable uses than additional soccer fields. In either case, Nick's Organic Farm would be preserved to function, perhaps with an educational component, for many more years to come. That would restore faith in our county government and create a "win-win" for all concerned.

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