

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **A mid-year report card: how are officials doing?**

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The title of the December 30, 2010 Federation Corner column asserted a "Year of challenges lies ahead." In this column we will take a look at some of the challenges outlined in that piece in December, and assess how our county officials are doing in responding to them.

At the outset of this piece billed as a mid-year evaluation, I will freely admit that the third week in August hardly qualifies as the middle of the year. But the Planning Board and County Council, and probably many top officials in the Executive Branch, take off from work for the month of August. A great many lower level staffers also take leave for at least part of the month. So this seems as good a time as any to consider our officials' performance on key issues in the first seven months of this year.

The December column began by announcing the budget would be a top priority this year. To his credit, County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett submitted a balanced Operating Budget to the County Council in March by closing a projected \$300 million shortfall. The Council partially restored proposed funding cuts in certain programs, but offset them with additional cutbacks in other areas. And, as MCCF Budget Committee Chair Chuck Lapinski stated in a March Federation Corner column on the budget ("Searching high and low for the down low on the budget", March 17, 2011), the County Executive and Council made "a number of seemingly small, but not insignificant, changes" in the Capital Budget that showed "real and sound fiscal fortitude."

The column last December also noted that the County Executive and Council would study the recommendations from the Organizational Reform Commission, which were released in January (listed in our column "Reorganize the County", February 17, 2011). Here our officials did not fare so well. Seven of the Commission's twenty-eight recommendations have been introduced in legislation by the County Council, and they have disapproved six of the seven with the backing of Mr. Leggett.

In December we noted "Near the top of the Council's agenda for 2011 should be consideration of the transportation tests that County Executive Leggett recommends replace the current test as part of the growth policy (now called the Subdivision Staging Policy and approved by Council every 4 years starting in 2012). The CE has proposed the Transportation Policy Area Review (TPAR) to more accurately calculate transit and roads capacity to handle new development in each planning area of the county, and to require developers pay for improvements if inadequacies exist." 2011 Council President Valerie Ervin has failed to schedule Council consideration of TPAR, as did her predecessor Councilmember Nancy Floreen when she served as Council President last year.

The Bus Rapid Transit Study, set to be released in early 2011, was just released. The study has been posted on the county Department of Transportation webpage, but several of my civic activist colleagues report that the link is not functioning correctly and attempts to download the study "froze up" and were unsuccessful.

On the environmental front, we noted in December that the County Council had yet to approve much needed amendments to the county Forest Conservation law, under consideration for four years now. And they need to enact new legislation to protect individual trees, and to preserve and improve the tree canopy in urban areas. The Council has yet to act, but citizens and building industry representatives have banded together to present their own proposal which is due to be released soon.

In the column last December we spoke of the need to reverse the environmental damage done to some stream watersheds in the county, and limit damage to sensitive areas like the Ten Mile Creek watershed in Clarksburg by limiting the amount of impervious surface allowed (buildings, streets, sidewalks and parking lots). The Council still has not defined a comprehensive plan to prevent further degradation to county streams, let alone reverse the damage already done. We are years, if not decades, away from enacting solutions tried by other communities in the United States, such as “daylighting” streams that have been relegated to underground culverts by raising them back to surface grade and providing green buffers.

The rewrite of the county’s Zoning Ordinance is still underway, with the initial draft set to be submitted to the Planning Board next month or early October. Approval by the County Council is at least a year or more away, yet the Planning Department is working feverishly to rewrite eight community master or sector plans and push them to the Council for approval before the tools (zone categories) in the new zoning ordinance are available. Why? I honestly couldn’t say.

On the positive side, the Council’s Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee (PHED) has been carefully analyzing proposed legislation to create two new mixed use zones—the Commercial Residential Town (CRT) Zone, and the Commercial Residential Neighborhood (CRN) Zone. Two members on the PHED, Council members George Leventhal and Marc Elrich, seem determined to take whatever time is necessary to adequately vet the new zones prior to reporting them out for full Council consideration and vote, something that was not done last year when the high-density CR Zone was hastily approved for use in the White Flint Sector Plan revision.

My conclusion is that the County Executive and officials on the Council and in the Planning Department have shown real backbone in making some truly tough decisions, inexplicably deferred action on others, and made truly bad decisions in some areas (most notably in not quickly implementing a majority of the recommendations made by the Organizational Reform Commission, which were widely hailed as promising more efficient and less costly government). Overall, I’d say our officials deserve a solid “C” grade.

NOTE: An archive of past Federation Corner columns is posted on the Civic Federation website at [www.montgomerycivic.org](http://www.montgomerycivic.org).

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*