

"Federation Corner' column  
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### **Whole lotta shaking goin' on**

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This Tuesday afternoon I was jarred into the realization that the Washington region is really not prepared for a major disaster...literally jarred. Just as I sat down to write this week's column, the 5.8 magnitude earthquake centered in Mineral, Virginia struck.

While I shook for the first few seconds I thought a large truck was passing my house or perhaps an airplane had crashed nearby, as I'm sure many others did. But even though I am an east coaster from birth, when the lateral movement started I immediately realized that I was experiencing my first earthquake.

For me, the temblor was at the same time a deeply disturbing and oddly satisfying event. It was disturbing because for decades I have lived on what I believed was "solid ground," yet that belief was disproven with each shake. And it was satisfying because, like millions of others living in the region, I now have a story to tell of where I was when "the big one" hit. We can be thankful that no one was killed, and only a handful of people suffered minor injuries, from an earthquake which was felt from Atlanta to Toronto and west to Chicago.

Montgomery County dodged a bullet on Tuesday because the quake was only a 5.8 magnitude and it was centered some seventy-five miles from the borders of our county. The epicenter was in Louisa County, Virginia, and it was not so lucky. The county courthouse there suffered significant structural damage, as did several public schools buildings. But, fortunate as we were, the quake should serve as a wake up call for our local officials.

Had the quake been centered here, with our county budget pared to the bone, I'm guessing we would be hard pressed to find the money to repair widespread damage to public facilities and infrastructure. The idea of a "rainy day fund" set aside to pay for emergencies now seems a distant memory from a bygone era of financial well being. But everybody is hurting in these hard economic times, and Montgomery is in no worse shape than most counties and probably fiscally better off than many.

It is other events that accompanied the quake that should cause our local officials to reflect on how well prepared our county or the metropolitan region is to deal with an emergency event of such scale. First of all, we now know that if a disaster strikes during a workday the regional transportation system will be of no use in getting employees home, let alone in helping to quickly evacuate residents from the area.

After the quake hit on Tuesday, Metro immediately instituted a 15-mile-an-hour speed limit for subway trains as a safety measure. As the subway stations jammed up, tens of thousands of workers realized they could not get home using the underground system and headed for the surface. There they found that the route signs on Metro buses had been triggered by computer software to read "Not in service." Not knowing the buses were really still in service, thousands of people who normally commute on public transit began walking to their destinations. And the volume of vehicle traffic quickly gridlocked roads and highways throughout the region.

Another disturbing occurrence on Tuesday was the number of persons who dialed 9-1-1 to report the quake, even though they personally had no emergency to report. That tied up emergency response systems in cities and counties throughout the region, preventing them from receiving calls from those who

might be in real need of help. And because the first reaction of so many people was to telephone someone else to talk about the quake, cell phone service was quickly disabled from the sheer volume of calls.

So, let's recap. If another widespread natural or manmade disaster should occur, God forbid, the transit system will be of no help in effecting a general evacuation. Roads and highways will be gridlocked and of no help either. It's no wonder the only crisis response plan the government has come up with is for residents to "shelter in place." And the telephone system will quickly go down, preventing us from communicating with each other or calling for help from emergency response services.

The one amazing bright spot on Tuesday was that, except in a few isolated locations, the electrical power grid continued to function following the quake. But let's not be too quick to give kudos to PEPCO.

Last Sunday when a violent series of afternoon thunderstorms passed through Bethesda and, incredibly, the power stayed on, service inexplicably went out during the night, hours after the storm had passed. And sometime after we all went to bed Monday night, although skies were clear and there was not even a breeze, electrical service was again interrupted. For the two nights before the quake, when weather was beautiful, folks in my neighborhood set their alarm clocks and went to bed only to find in the morning that their power had gone out overnight and they were late for work. I guess some things never change.

*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)*