

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **It's all too much, and yet not enough**

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All politics is local, the saying goes. Since 1925, the Montgomery County Civic Federation has been the countywide citizens group that attracted politically aware individuals looking to make a difference in the county or maybe just their community.

Lately it seems many critically important decisions are being considered by county officials. But they seem to be putting less and less effort into explaining them to county residents, and paying less and less attention to the opinions of residents.

The population of the county is increasing, fueled in great part by people moving here from other places. Often English is not their first language. Officials claim to care about reaching out to residents. But often that caring extends only as far as placing information on the county government website, or making it available via internet social media, in several different languages.

But how many residents can reasonably be expected to 'follow the county on Twitter' or 'friend the county on Facebook'? And is that sufficient outreach, even in our internet connected society?

It is true that both County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett and the County Council hold the occasional Town Hall meeting. Mr. Leggett will hold a Town Hall meeting at Westland Middle School in Bethesda the evening of September 21. And the Council will hold a Town Hall Meeting with public school students the evening of October 12. Is it enough for officials to simply ask for public comment when they haven't explained to the public what the pressing issues the county faces are?

This fall the Council intends to consider a revision of the Housing Policy being formulated by County Executive Leggett. But will anyone address county residents and explain the proposed changes before seeking comments in testimony before the Council?

The master plans for seven county communities are currently undergoing revision (Kensington, Wheaton, Langley Park, Long Branch, Chevy Chase Lake, Burtonsville' commercial area, and Glenmont). The plans will increase the limits on allowed growth in these areas and, in so doing, significantly impact the future livability of these areas. How many residents understand or have even read the master plans for their communities? Has the Planning Department done an adequate job of explaining the significance of, or the details in, these plans?

Let's talk redistricting. Are you interested in the redistricting of the Congressional Districts in the state? The General Assembly will take up that issue in a Special Session this fall. Interested in the boundaries of the county's five Councilmanic Districts? A special commission has been created to recommend changes to them. Interested in the boundaries for the school districts used to elect members to the county Board of Education (BoE)? The BoE is looking into changing those. Have residents received sufficient education in the details and importance of each of the proposed changes?

Interested in transportation issues? The State Highway Administration will make a presentation on proposed road and transit projects the evening of September 15, to be carried live on county cable television. The county delegation to the General Assembly will hold a hearing on the issue the evening of

November 16. But is this an adequate method for officials to explain and seek comment on issues that will impact the lives of residents on a daily basis for the foreseeable future?

For years now the Planning Department, along with a paid consultant and a select group called the Zoning Advisory Panel, has been working on a complete rewrite of the zoning laws of the county. The changes will impact everyone in the county, regardless of their location. Sure, there is information on the Department's website. And the Planning Director has been touring a dog-and-pony show explaining the proposed new zoning to select citizens' groups. But is this sufficient outreach to explain changes that will impact future building in commercial and residential areas throughout the county?

What do you think about public schools? The new Superintendent of Schools wants to hear your comments. Have ideas for changes in the county's permitting process? The Department of Permitting Services wants to hear from you. Have a new angle on how to wrestle the county budget into balance? The County Executive and Council say they are always open to suggestions.

It's all too much for the average resident to grasp because they're not getting enough from their officials. What's missing is leadership.

County officials are headed in dozens of directions at once. Effective leaders set priorities for action, explain their plans so that everyone is pulling in the same direction, and let the less important stuff slide.

Real leaders find ways to engage the public. They don't post information on a website then wring their hands and complain that people don't care.

Job creation is a major focus of politicians on a national level this week. Maybe that's a good place for county politicians to start. But why not put aside creating or attracting new businesses, and focus on retaining the local businesses and jobs that already exist in the county?

Forget trying to stop outsourcing of jobs to other countries. Why not try and hold down the continual increase in property taxes, or reduce them, to stop residents being outsourced right out of the county to other, less costly places to live?

For eighty-six years the Civic Federation has acted as a voice for residents and partnered with county government, sometimes pushing it into changes it was reluctant to undergo. But at the moment it seems there are too many issues coming at residents too quickly, with too little explanation being given and too little discussion of the long-lasting consequences of the decisions confronting us.

*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)*