

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **There is little transparency on sustainability**

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The program for the September 12 meeting of the Montgomery County Civic Federation was entitled "Sustainability: Definition and Implementation." The Federation hosted a panel of guests for the program that included a representative from the Federal government, a County Council member, and two staff members from the county Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

Sustainability is a bit of a "black box" issue for many citizens, somewhat shrouded in mystery. So I looked forward to the program clarifying the term and providing insight into the county's attempt to implement a broad based sustainability program. But as competent and informed as the speakers were (and they were), they focused almost entirely on energy related efforts to achieve the reduction of greenhouse gases mandated by the county's Climate Protection Plan. And there the results are mixed.

The Federal government representative shared the United Nations' definition of sustainability-- "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." She explained the three pillars of sustainability explained in the Brundtland Commission's report ("*Our Common Future*") as Social, Economic, and Environment. And she described efforts to reduce consumption of fossil fuel-generated energy by Federal buildings.

The Council member talked about the county's Home Energy Loan Program and the Solar Energy Tax Credit. He then admitted that the response to the tax credit program has been so overwhelming that there is an estimated five year delay in getting the credit to new applicants. He also discussed the court rescinding of the Carbon Tax legislation approved by the Council, and mentioned an enviable Property Assessed Clean Energy Program begun in another state.

Staff members from the DEP explained a bit about the county's Green Building Act that mandates new buildings over 10,000 square feet meet minimum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards, and a related solar energy project for affordable housing. They mentioned that the Federal stimulus money received by the county has been used to fund seven sustainability programs, including energy retrofitting of county buildings, education and outreach, a Commercial/Multi-Family Building Rebate Program, workforce development, and a residential rebate program. And they talked about the county's Green Business Certification Program, and the model set by the Bethesda Green program in helping private businesses reduce their carbon footprint.

But none of the speakers mentioned the document "Healthy and Sustainable Communities: A Framework for Action," which prepared jointly by the county Planning Department and Department of Environmental Protection and released in September 2008. And I may have missed it, but I don't think any of the panelists mentioned the Sustainability Working Group either. So I decided to do a bit of digging on the county website.

The first surprise was that the words "sustainability" and "sustainable" appear nowhere on the homepages for the county Planning Department or Department of Environmental Protection. If internet users click on the term "climate change" on the DEP homepage, they are taken to a webpage that at least admits the county has a Sustainability Working Group (SWG). And if you click on that term, you are finally taken to the webpage for the SWG.

After doing a bit more digging, I discovered that the Sustainability Working Group was established by county Bill 32-07, which was approved by the Council on Earth Day--April 4, 2008. The legislation charged the SWG with developing a Climate Protection Plan for the county, which they did. It was presented to the Council on January 15, 2009. The bill also required the SWG to present an Annual Report to the Council and County Executive by January 15 of each year, detailing progress made toward achieving the goals set in the Climate Protection Plan. And the first annual report came in right on time.

The next surprise was that the second Annual Report by the Sustainability Working Group was presented to Council and the County Executive on February 18, 2010, more than a month later than required by law. And, as far as I can tell, no annual report has been filed for this year.

I encountered the third surprise when reading the transmittal memo for the 2010 Annual Report by the SWG. It states that the Climate Protection Plan "set an ambitious goal of reducing the County's greenhouse gas emissions (relative to the FY05 baseline) by 10 percent every five years between 2010 and 2050. This translates to an 80 percent reduction by 2050." The shocker is that the memo also states an independent analysis conducted by Science Applications International Corporation concluded "the County, were it to implement the Climate Protection Plan's most viable short term actions, would achieve only 12 percent of the total reductions needed to meet its long-term goal."

So, the news isn't good. Is this why it's so hard to find information on the county government website about sustainability? Are officials embarrassed by the results? There is supposed to be a comprehensive information and education program aimed at explaining to residents how they can contribute to sustainability through actions like walking or biking to work, school or errands, planting trees, using "grey water" to wash your car or water the lawn, and buying locally grown produce.

I hope officials do not wait until the county is "leading the nation" (their favorite phrase) in some aspect of sustainability before reaching out to citizens. The sooner residents are educated and involved in the effort, the greater the possibility that the county can reach its goals for sustainability.

*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)*