

"Federation Corner" column
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Federation to honor 'Neighborhood Montgomery' group

by Ann McDonald

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At our November 14 meeting, the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) will present a Community Hero Award to the group Neighborhood Montgomery, a grass-roots citizens' organization that sprang up in response to rezoning threats to the county's residential communities.

First, the Montgomery County Planning Department began a process of rewriting the entire county zoning code, as requested by the County Council. The original idea was to simplify and reorganize the current code, but county planners also began separately revising current residential, commercial, and mixed-use zones with little citizen input. This process continues.

In March 2010, the County Council enacted a new, wide ranging set of Commercial/Residential (CR) mixed use zones that it first applied in the revision of the master plan for White Flint, which allowed large scale, high density urban redevelopment in that area.

In early 2011, the Council enacted an updated Housing Element (chapter) to the county General Plan that weakened long-standing policy protections for established residential communities affected by development.

When it became clear that White Flint's new CR zone would not work for planning areas like Kensington and Takoma-Langley, the Planning Board proposed two new CR mixed use zones (CRT or CR Town; and CRN or CR Neighborhood) for locations near or next to existing residential communities. These two new CR zones had many undesirable aspects, e.g. allowing much taller buildings next to or near residential communities, reducing meaningful public participation in planning, and threatening the master plan process.

We were all extremely fortunate that dedicated citizens, largely from the MCCF and communities in the down-county area, tracked these developments closely; and worked actively to counter measures that threatened residential communities. However, so many alarming zoning changes and issues were arising all at once that more citizens needed to understand the impacts, and become involved right away in protecting their residential neighborhoods.

In April of 2011, concerned citizens formed Neighborhood Montgomery, a "neighborhood network for sensible growth." The group's message is sustainability, affordability, and quality of life for all of our neighborhoods. The group aims to give as many citizens as possible the information and resources they need to make their voices heard, and to fight effectively against zoning changes that could negatively impact their communities

The County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee was scheduled to review the proposed new CRN and CRT zones in May, and there was pressure for fast approval so the new zones could be incorporated into upcoming Master and Sector Plan rewrites. So, Neighborhood Montgomery had to move fast.

Members with years of zoning experience held information meetings for 20 to 25 community groups all over the county. Most of these meetings were led by Meredith Wellington (an attorney and former

Planning Board member) along with zoning whizzes Julie Davis, Pat Baptiste (also a former Planning Board member), and Jenny Sue Dunner. They generously donated their own time to go out and speak to citizens whenever and wherever they could, giving citizens a crash course in zoning law; as well as advice on how to persuade County decision makers to balance neighborhoods' wellbeing against developer interests. Those who attended the meetings, in turn, informed their own communities. By this means, hundreds of residents were reached effectively in a very short time.

Other members of the group set up Neighborhood Montgomery's Facebook page, a Google group web site, and email list, so any resident who signed up could receive frequent updates drafted by Meredith Wellington on what the Council was doing. Neighborhood Montgomery members also transmitted these memos to their communities, and urged residents to send their own thoughts to the Council. The effectiveness of this outreach became apparent when some Council members mentioned getting an unprecedented flood of emails from constituents on rezoning issues.

At the same time, Neighborhood Montgomery leadership sent detailed "issue letters" to the Council on specific aspects of the proposed new zones. And they met with members of the Council and the PHED Committee repeatedly, to make sure that the interests of residential neighborhoods were kept at the forefront. In response to such intense public interest, the Council's PHED Committee held an unusually high number (9) of work sessions, all of which were heavily attended by concerned citizens.

Neighborhood Montgomery won a few and lost a few as the final zoning changes were adopted. But very importantly, the existing requirement remained intact: that in order for the new zones to be applied to your neighborhood, the zone must be recommended in an approved Master or Sector Plan. This protects citizens' active role in development planning that affects their communities.

The fight isn't over. The Planning Board is going to issue proposed revisions to the residential zoning code next, and there is still much uncertainty about the continued viability of master and sector plans. So there will be much more work for Neighborhood Montgomery to do to make sure citizens' voices are heard loud and clear.

Please come and cheer on Meredith Wellington who will be accepting the award on behalf of the entire Neighborhood Montgomery group. The award recognizes the dedication and effort of citizens who are giving their own time and energy to inform and mobilize citizens, so residential neighborhoods will be protected, as Montgomery County grows and develops.

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