

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **The year that wasn't**

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This is the last week of 2011. And the end of the year is the time that journalists compile lists of the memorable events which have occurred over the past twelve months.

In past years, this column has participated in the festival of list making in its own small way. But the idea of doing a factual analysis of Montgomery County accomplishments and shortcomings this year gave me a bad case of mental indigestion.

The following, then, is my list of positive events from a 2011 that never happened.

In January, after County Executive Ike Leggett detailed a bleak fiscal outlook for the Fiscal Year 2012 county budget, scores of Montgomery County millionaires decided not to claim their vacation homes as their principal residences. They chose instead to admit that they actually do live here for more six months of the year, and agreed to pay their fair share of personal income tax to the county.

In a show of solidarity with the millionaires, several major Montgomery County corporations agreed to stop claiming their headquarters were located in post office boxes in Delaware, a practice that allowed them to avoid paying corporate income tax to the county (the old "paper corporation" loophole). Instead they chose to pay their fair share of taxes to the county, too.

As a result of the above two actions, the county received a record high share of tax revenue from the state in the first quarter of the year. County Executive Leggett was able to revise his FY2012 budget, and do away with planned staff reductions and program cutbacks for all departments and agencies. And, for the first time in recent memory, the property tax rate for the coming year was raised by less the maximum allowed charter limit.

Riding a high from the rosier fiscal outlook, the County Council unanimously agreed to work with the County Executive to implement all twenty-nine recommendations made in the Final Report of the Governmental Reorganization Commission. "We need to honor the hard work and dedication of the citizen volunteers who served on the Commission by insuring this is one advisory report that doesn't sit on a shelf gathering dust," said one Council member. "We should not stop trying to increase government efficiency and cut costs just because the budget picture has temporarily improved."

In the spring of 2011, the county set a goal of finally providing the infrastructure promised to Clarksburg residents in the vision set forth for their community. Sidewalks were installed from Town Center all the way down MD 355 to Clarksburg High School, so students no longer have to walk to school on the shoulder of a busy road. And sidewalks were built to connect the dozens of individual housing subdivisions with one another, making Clarksburg a true model of a walkable/bikeable community. In addition, construction began on a police substation, new fire department and public library.

By summer, the Council and County Executive realized the folly of their former action in declaring light rail the preferred option for the Corridor Cities Transitway. "We can build a bus rapid transit system for half the cost of light rail and in half the time," said one Council member. "Clarksburg was promised mass transit and, by God, we're going to give it to them as quickly as humanly possible." And, in another show of good faith to town residents, the County Executive added money to the Capital Improvements Program

to immediately move the carousel, which was donated to the people of Clarksburg, from its temporary home in Wheaton Regional Park to Ovid Hazen Wells Park.

Just before the August break, in a deal brokered by the regional Council of Governments, Fairfax County in Virginia and Montgomery County mutually agreed to stop competing with one another. "We can save a lot of taxpayer money by not vying with one another to see who can offer the biggest tax breaks to entice corporations to locate to our counties," said a Fairfax County official. "There are plenty of corporations and jobs to go around. We should be working together."

In a related development, the county Department of Economic Development announced it would stop giving grants and property tax breaks to megacorporations making huge profits and instead focus its resources on local and small businesses, especially those displaced by redevelopment. "It is time we all appreciate the contribution to the county's economic vitality made by its small businesses," said a representative of the County Chamber of Commerce.

In a joint statement made in early fall, the County Executive, the Council and the Planning Board announced that each would consult with the Montgomery County Civic Federation on all proposed changes to government policies and procedures. "County residents are some of the most knowledgeable in the country," said one official. "And the Federation comprises a phenomenal reservoir of volunteer talent that the county would do well to utilize." (Hey, a fellow can dream, can't he?)

Finally, just before Thanksgiving, the county experienced the first in a growing number of "flash jobs"--groups of young people spontaneously converging on a location to perform charitable deeds, enabled by social networking technology. "I had just started raking my lawn," said one elderly homeowner, "when a dozen kids came out of nowhere, rakes in hand, and in under ten minutes they had every leaf piled at the curb. They disappeared as fast as they came." Similar "flash job" groups have helped residents wash cars, clean house windows, and shovel snow from sidewalks.

Okay, so none of the events happened this year. Maybe the list has given folks some ideas for 2012.

*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)*