

"Federation Corner" column
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Federation committee duties--Part 1

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This is the first in a series of articles detailing the regularly occurring and "as needed" duties of the nine standing committees of the Montgomery County Civic Federation, to further the MCCF mission to preserve and improve quality of life for county residents.

A primary responsibility of the MCCF Planning and Land Use (PLU) Committee is to monitor revisions made to the overall General Plan for Montgomery County, as well as to the individual master plans and sector plans for the various communities in the county. For those uninitiated in the ways of land use planning, a master plan is the name of the blueprint for future growth in a large area of the county, like the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area. And a sector plan is the name of the same kind of growth blueprint for a small area or "sector", like the Bethesda Central Business District and immediate vicinity, which is located within a larger planning area.

The County Council is the body granted authority under State law to decide on a category of zoning for each property in the county. Zoning categories dictate what land use is allowed on a property (residential, commercial, industrial or agricultural) and the standards for construction that can occur on that property (size and height of buildings, required building set backs from the property lines, etc.). Approval of master and sector plans is one of the ways in which the Council can apply zoning to properties, with recommendations from the Planning Board.

Every six months, usually in April and October, the Council approves the work program for Planning Board revision of master and sector plans, looking forward several years into the future. This work program sets the month and year in which the Board will transmit its recommendation to the Council for revision of each plan on the approved schedule.

The MCCF PLU Committee monitors the biennial work program approval process. It also analyzes each master and sector plan revision that comes forward, assessing whether the infrastructure being proposed (schools, roads, transit facilities, plus police, fire and rescue squad facilities) will be adequate to accommodate the larger number of households and increased amount of commercial and industrial space being proposed for the plan area.

The MCCF delegates who volunteer to serve on the PLU Committee also monitor changes made to the county Growth Policy, which is now called the Subdivision Staging Policy. Under changes adopted in 2009, this policy will now be approved by Council once every four years, in the second year of each four-year Council term.

As was mentioned in last week's column, the Subdivision Staging Policy does not so much pace approval of new development projects as allow all that want to go forward with construction to do so, but imposes an added fee on projects located in areas with inadequate infrastructure. These fees are then put toward Capital Budget projects designed to increase capacity of the public infrastructure to accommodate growth.

Every year the Montgomery County Public Schools system calculates the future student enrollment and capacity of classrooms in each high school cluster in the county, and sends that information to the Planning Board for approval. The PLU Committee monitors this process in coordination with the

MCCF Education Committee. Adequacy of roads and transit systems will also be analyzed periodically in the midst of the four year cycle for the Subdivision Staging Policy, and the PLU Committee will monitor this process in coordination with the MCCF Transportation Committee.

The Civic Federation's PLU Committee also monitors individual development projects as they move through the Planning Board approval and construction process, to assure that zoning as well as other county standards, such as forest conservation requirements or stormwater handling measures, are appropriately enforced.

In addition, the Committee analyzes land use related legislation introduced in County Council. This legislation comes in two primary forms: bills that change standards in law (like forest or water quality protection measures); and zoning text amendments that change the zone standards applied to new construction (such as changes in land use or activities allowed, or building height limits and required setbacks from property lines).

Following analysis, the PLU Committee members then might recommend a Federation position on a piece of legislation introduced in Council. With approval of our Executive Committee--comprised of elected officers and the appointed chairs of other Federation committees--a PLU recommended position is then put to the MCCF delegates for consideration and vote at the next monthly meeting. If approved by the delegates, the PLU then comments on proposed legislation either by submitting written remarks or testifying in person before Council at public hearings.

Finally, there are "one time only" initiatives proposed by the Council, County Executive or Planning Board on which the PLU comments, on an "as needed" basis. One example of such an initiative is the Council proposal to change the standards and process of approval for accessory apartments.

Another example of a "one time" initiative is County Executive Isiah Leggett's effort to "green tape" private construction projects by making approval and permitting faster and less costly for the developer or builder, which is being coordinated by the Department of Permitting Services. Still another example of such an initiative is the complete rewrite of county zoning laws that is underway at the Planning Board, which will be transmitted to the Council next year for consideration and approval.

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