

"Federation Corner" column
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Ideas for county government New Year's resolutions

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We've celebrated Eid, Hanukkah, the winter solstice, Christmas, and Kwanzaa: times for giving gifts and gathering together with families and friends. Now, at the closing of the old year and the dawning of the new, it is time for reflecting on what has gone before and formulating aspirations for the year to come.

With that in mind, I'd like to suggest some New Year's resolutions for government that would bring cheer to all of the citizens of Montgomery County.

Talk Less, Listen More

Spend less time telling communities your vision for how we should live and less time giving us your expert opinion on what you believe citizens should want. Instead, seek substantive public input and give the resulting feedback serious consideration. Neighborhoods have on-the-ground knowledge and wisdom you can't get any other way.

But you don't have to take my word for it. A National Academy of Sciences study concluded that stakeholder involvement processes can improve the quality of policies and help them become implemented. "Public participation should be fully incorporated into environmental assessment and decision-making processes, and it should be recognized by government agencies and other organizers of the processes as a requisite of effective action, not merely a formal procedural requirement." (Dietz and Stern, 2008)

As an added bonus, many MOCO residents are highly skilled professionals. It's amazing that government will pay top dollar for consultant advice while ignoring equally-qualified professionals who are willing to volunteer some time and talent.

Spend Less Time Chasing Awards and More Time Honestly Communicating

Montgomery County agencies have fully embraced the self-esteem movement. They love to trumpet "gold" ratings and "award-winning" programs. Unfortunately, many of these are self-certified awards. (That's like me qualifying for a weight-loss award without ever having to get on a scale.)

These meaningless awards are no substitute for transparency and well-crafted performance measures. We don't need more PR and window dressing, we need a more open government. Too often government decisions are based on "black box" calculations or on aggregated budget categories. The public should have ready access to the detailed information underpinning these decisions.

However, open government means more than just randomly publishing data. We also need to have a conversation about what information government is collecting and how it's being utilized. (For example, one cannot analyze the effectiveness of a new management approach unless baseline information is collected first. In other words, I have to get on the scale before starting a new diet.)

Learn to Share

Most jurisdictions in our area co-locate government facilities. For example, in Prince George's County recreation centers and schools are often built together with a shared gymnasium. Co-location saves money and offers residents the convenience of accomplishing multiple goals with a single trip. In

Montgomery County, however, government offices and facilities are spread across the landscape like feudal bastions.

Don't Neglect Unglamorous Tasks

Every politician and commissioner loves big, showy new projects like multimillion dollar buildings, billion-dollar transportation schemes, and bold new policy initiatives. There are contracts to let, press conferences to hold, groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies to attend.

On the other hand, there are the unsexy tasks: digging into the details of proposed budgets, figuring out how to properly maintain existing infrastructure then filling those potholes and sweeping those gutters and storm drains, effectively crafting (then implementing) laws and policies, and providing high-quality public services while being frugal with tax dollars. Most of the crucial actions are in this unglamorous management arena. This is where we determine whether government works or fails.

It's an ambitious list, but I believe it's achievable.

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