

"Federation Corner" column
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Activists work on range of issues

by Jim Humphrey
member, MCCF Executive Committee

In the decade that I have been a delegate to the Montgomery County Civic Federation from my neighborhood citizens association, I have been impressed with the range of issues on which my colleagues in the activist community are involved. And the knowledge, skills, and level of commitment these volunteers bring to their efforts give proof to the saying that the price of democracy is eternal vigilance...and a lot of hard work.

Federation delegates monitor, comment on, and participate in the entire gamut of policy decisions and local government processes, all of which affect the quality of life for residents.

Certain of my fellow activists focus their time and energy on protecting the rich set of environmental resources--the trees and other flora, the wildlife, and the many ponds, lakes and stream watersheds--located within the borders of Montgomery County. Others devote their free time to helping improve the quality of K-12, college and adult education available in the county, and to insuring the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education consider the views of all stakeholders when making decisions.

Some activists concentrate their efforts on county health and safety issues, public utilities, parks, recreation facilities and programs, transportation, government financial matters including funding of public building projects, or the interrelated areas of land use, housing and economic development. And some concentrate on increasing the level of transparency and citizen inclusion in all processes of county government.

I have worked with activists who believe the best use of their time is trying to affect decisions and policies of local government that impact residents throughout the county. While others limit their attention to those matters that impact their local community. Of course many activists wear multiple hats, and also work on countywide issues while their primary focus is on their own community.

As an example of local focus, colleagues of mine are currently involved in the revision of the master plans for the Chevy Chase Lake, Glenmont, Long Branch, White Oak, and White Flint North areas. And a primary focus of one colleague is support for the small businesses in their community, reasoning that a financially healthy group of retailers offering an array of goods and services will make for a high quality of life for area residents.

Senior activists who have retired often volunteer to attend meetings and testify at hearings that take place during the work day. Those still working at their own careers usually participate in activities scheduled in evening hours or on weekends.

A primary function of delegates to the Civic Federation is to educate their neighbors about county government issues that will likely impact them. But the communication flows in both directions, with delegates also informing government officials of the problems facing the communities in which they live, shop, work and play.

A high percentage of Montgomery County residents hold college or post-graduate degrees, and many in the county's activist community bring a similar level of educational achievement to their civic activities.

Our local government is indeed fortunate to have such a well educated corps of activists volunteering their time and energy to improve the county.

Some activists with whom I have worked are good researchers, while others are gifted writers. Some have a knack for analyzing various aspects of problems; some have the interpersonal skills to facilitate group consensus regarding solutions to those problems; while others possess the leadership qualities needed to guide those implementing the solutions.

While touting the merits of civic activists, however, I do not want readers to get the idea that there is anything extraordinary about them. They are, at their core, county residents just like you. The one particular attribute all activists do share is that they are active...they attend meetings, testify at hearings, participate in working groups, represent their neighborhoods as delegates to the Civic Federation.

Many civic activists are still working at their careers. Many have spouses and families. Many are active in other endeavors: PTAs, service groups or other non-profit charities, faith based activities; organized sports or recreation activities, etc. Yet they all believe the message which used to be taught in all Montgomery County 9th grade civics classes: that participating in civic activities and helping to build safe, nurturing, well functioning communities is the duty of every citizen.

Residents of our county have a host of civic activities available to them. Given your current life circumstances, it may be that you only have time and energy to attend quarterly meetings of your neighborhood citizens group or homeowners' association. But don't downplay the act--gathering together with your neighbors to learn about, and share opinions on, issues that affect your community is the essence of representative democracy.

If you've got a little more time, consider representing your group as a delegate to the monthly meetings of the Civic Federation (only ten evenings a year--we take a break during July and August). And check out the MCCF website on the internet, at www.montgomerycivic.org, to see the range of issues your neighbors are working on.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800 to 1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com