

"Federation Corner" column
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County Executive creates nighttime economy task force

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Encouraging late night businesses such as theaters, bars, and restaurants can enliven and generate an economic boost for commercial areas that are otherwise empty after stores and offices close. Unfortunately, efforts to promote these districts by local governments can also result in parking and other transportation issues; additional drunken and disorderly complaints; trash, vandalism, and other nuisance and crime problems for residents of these areas and the surrounding communities. These are issues that must be dealt with for any night-time entertainment area to succeed. Visiting the Adams-Morgan and Georgetown neighborhoods in DC or Old Town in Alexandria can illustrate the positive and negative impacts of late night businesses.

In May of this year, County Executive Isiah Leggett established a Nighttime Economy Task Force and appointed nineteen members to the group, along with county oversight staff and ex officio members from the Montgomery County Council, Planning Board and the offices of our local U.S. Representatives.

As Montgomery County attempts to revitalize its central commercial areas with various night-time businesses, it has discovered the problems associated with night-time entertainment districts that other local governments in the US and many other countries have already been recognizing and attempting to manage for years. Montgomery County should learn from the experiences of these other jurisdictions.

England has even developed a "best practices" manual for local governments. Many other jurisdictions including DC have developed and published online their Night-Time Economy Plans. A plan developed for Victoria, British Columbia (www.victoria.ca/assets/City~Hall/Documents/task-force-downtown-late-night-report.pdf) is a good model because it uses data provided by city agencies to determine the nature and scope of the problems and research on effective strategies to identify specific measures that both public agencies and private businesses will take to either prevent or mitigate problems.

Establishments and facilities commonly associated with the nighttime economy include restaurants, bars, cafes, lounges, performance venues, retail, and public spaces, including those with programmed activity. The Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI) Model includes Six Core Elements of a nighttime economy (the seventh was added by Montgomery County); and the Task Force has subcommittees assigned to focus on each of these core elements.

- (1) Entertainment – including dining/social/performance venues, events, talent retention, marketing, and assessment of the economic impact of these offerings.
- (2) Public Use & Amenities – including geographic boundaries, multi-use sidewalks, outdoor dining, street performers, vendors/kiosks, food trucks, public markets, pedestrian safety and access, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance, lighting, and panhandling issues.
- (3) Quality of Life – including housing that is affordable, noise control, soundproofing of venues, trash and cigarette pick-up, and communications with the public.
- (4) Transportation – including nighttime transportation services and amenities, safe rides, shared rides, valet parking, taxi services, parking lot safety, and DUI prevention.

(5) Public Safety – including crime prevention, understanding issues related to closing times and crowds.

(6) Venue Operations & Safety – including liquor laws, safety plans, server training, security training, patron behavior, age identification, and safety alliances.

(7) Business Engagement – including the permitting process, customer service training, identification of nightlife networks, hours of operation, and business incentives.

Information on our county's newly established Nighttime Economy Task Force, its members, subcommittees, scope of work, and work plan are available on its website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/nighttimeeconomy

The group was tasked with examining the following questions and opportunities:

- What kind of mix of business, entertainment, and arts would make a vibrant and attractive urban center?
- How do we attract businesses in defined geographic areas that appeal to multiple generations?
- What are the national trends and models on nighttime economy?
- How do we develop local models to enhance the county's nighttime offerings in its urban centers?

Because the Task Force will focus specifically on the nighttime economies in Bethesda, Germantown, Rockville, Silver Spring, and Wheaton, meetings of the group are planned to take place each of these communities. Meetings take place from 5 to 7 p.m. on the third Monday of the month. The group's first meeting was held May 20 in Silver Spring, the June 17 meeting was in Bethesda, July will be in Wheaton, August in Rockville, September in Germantown, and then back to Silver Spring for the October meeting. The Task Force is expected to complete its work within six month of its first meeting, and report to the Chief Administrative Office prior to submitting their report and recommendations with suggested implementation methods to the County Executive.

I will be monitoring the activities of the Nighttime Economy Task Force, with its seven subcommittees and five communities involved, for the Civic Federation. There will be plenty of opportunities for participation by residents of the county in this study effort. The challenge will be developing processes to identify potential problems and effective strategies for prevention and mitigation of the negative impacts of attracting large crowds of patrons to night-time businesses.

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