

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - September 12, 2013

Voice of the people sometimes needs amplification

by Jim Humphrey
member, MCCF Executive Committee

In Montgomery County, neighborhood citizens associations and condominium and homeowners associations are the most basic units of our form of government--the representative democracy. Meetings of these groups function just as town and village meetings do elsewhere. They serve as "mini-democracies" allowing citizens to voice their concerns and vote on the critical issues that impact their communities and their daily lives. These neighborhood groups can then pass on community opinions and concerns to our elected officials in Rockville.

An individual or a small number of persons writing to the County Council to ask help in solving a problem may get a reply but may not get action to address the problem. But there is an unwritten rule that the members of that body will act on an issue for which 200 or more letters or emails are received. Since my neighborhood association, for example, has over 500 households, there is a greater likelihood that Council might act on a request from this group.

But the voice of the people in Montgomery County can often be drowned out in the discussion of important issues by the more politically persuasive voice of special interests. These special interests, such as the development and building industries, often make large contributions to local political campaigns that result in their having special access and influence over the decisions of our government. Because of this, over eighty five years ago neighborhood citizens groups decided to band together and create a countywide group--the Montgomery County Civic Federation.

Ever since the Civic Federation was founded in 1925, residents have had an instrument to amplify their voice when seeking redress of grievances or when weighing in on an issue before the county government. The Federation is akin to a congress of neighborhood groups that allows residents to speak to the county government in a unified voice, attempting to balance the influence of special interests.

The mission of the Civic Federation is a simple one: to sustain and improve the quality of life for the citizens of the county. To find out more about the Civic Federation, or download a membership application form, check out their website at www.montgomerycivic.org.

Just as voting is important to the health of a representative democracy, so is participation in the functions of government. By speaking up at a neighborhood association meeting, you can influence others to your position. Then your local citizens association can seek the support of other groups by joining and actively participating in the Civic Federation. And, as a result, the Federation will then have the strength in numbers to seek those changes from government that will make life better for us all. But in a democracy such as ours the responsibility to participate falls first and foremost on each individual citizen.

Neighborhood associations often have working committees that are usually in need of volunteers, so sign up to help. For example, an Education Committee could work with local PTAs to insure your kids get a good quality education. You might establish a Land Use Committee to investigate and provide input on development planned for within or on the borders of your community. And a Traffic and Safety committee can work toward limiting traffic through your neighborhood and improving pedestrian and bicyclist safety. Neighborhood associations also need volunteers to attend meetings of groups like the Civic Federation, the County Council, the Planning Board, and the regional Citizens Advisory Board, in order to share your issues of concern with others.

In addition to their contributions to a well functioning democracy, neighborhood associations can also help meet the social and service needs of a healthy community. My neighborhood group annually hosts a Valentine's Day Social, Christmas Cookie Exchange, and a Fourth of July Parade comprised of our kids riding decorated bicycles and wagons. These events and others bring us together informally, and help welcome newcomers to the neighborhood.

Our association members also serve meals to the homeless at the local soup kitchen on a regular basis, and roll up their sleeves for an annual Spring planting to beautify our local elementary school. And, our newsletter keeps members current on the official and social news, advertises babysitting, lawn care and other services provided by our neighbor teens, and strengthens our sense of community.

As former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "It takes a village to raise a child." Similarly, it can also take a village or neighborhood association to help senior citizens in need of assistance, lend a hand to single-parent families, grieve over our losses, and take pride in our accomplishments.

Montgomery County has a long tradition of neighborhood citizens associations. These groups help create in each of us a sense of belonging, and they provide stability that strengthens us individually and collectively and improves the quality of our lives.

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 montgomerycivic@yahoo.com