

"Federation Corner" column
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Federation salutes pedestrian safety activist Erwin Mack

by Peggy Dennis
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At our upcoming monthly meeting on May 14, the Montgomery County Civic Federation will honor one of the county's leading advocates for pedestrian safety, Erwin Mack, by presenting him with a Community Hero award. Erwin and his wife, Sylvia, lived and raised four children in California for 27 years. Then, in 1977 they moved to Maryland. Five years later, in 1982, Erwin bought an existing business in Takoma Park which he operated for 14 years before retiring. During that time he served as President of two Rotary Clubs.

Of that period when he ran the Takoma Park business Erwin writes, "I watched as the demographics changed to a majority Latino community where Takoma Park and Langley Park intersect at University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue. This was the second major cultural change for that area and it brought folks to the United States, many of whom had lived in rural areas in the country of their birth and were not prepared for the significant challenges to which they were not accustomed.

"Without personal transportation and needing to use the commercial sectors close to where they lived, crossing the streets became a challenge and, more often than not, swarms of people crossed wherever they wished. This brought the inevitable collisions with cars resulting in many injuries and deaths. That intersection, now called the Crossroads, became the third most dangerous intersection in Maryland, missing being second by only a fraction.

"In a horrible accident in 1984, two young mothers, one carrying her baby and another pushing a stroller with her baby in it, stepped off the sidewalk without looking and all were hit by a car, with the result that both babies died and the mothers were seriously injured.

"This moved me to say 'Enough is enough!' and I formed an organization called Multijurisdictional Pedestrian Safety Committee. It took five years of meetings to persuade the State Highway Administration and the local political structure in both Prince George's and Montgomery Counties to agree to a total restructuring of the entire intersection to include relocating bus stops, crosswalks, signals and installing a median fence to redirect pedestrians, as well as urging the planning for a transit center to coordinate bus service.

"The final cost to reconstruct the intersection was \$7,000,000, plus the additional eventual cost of the transit center finally just now beginning to be constructed. The intersection is no longer on the dangerous list."

I have come to know Erwin Mack from his service with the County's Pedestrian Bicycle Traffic Safety Advisory Committee (PBTSAC). He has chaired this committee for the past five years running tight but comprehensive meetings, delegating responsibility for different initiatives to those best able to carry out the work, and treating all--committee members and guests--with courtesy and respect.

While civic activists are typically drawn into their advocacy work by land use fights, school issues or environmental concerns, Erwin's interest and passion has been focused on a very discreet but important issue of public safety. As the county urbanizes and becomes more densely populated, the need for streets and paths that are safe and inviting for pedestrians and bicyclists grows.

We applaud Mr. Mack's work in the pedestrian safety field and hope that the County will continue to benefit from his experience and wisdom, even as he retires from the PBTSAC. The MCCF is pleased to honor Erwin Mack as a Community Hero.

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