

"Federation Corner" column
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Civic action lessons learned from Farquhar Middle School issue

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The Future Farquhar Community Coalition just completed a three-year battle to rebuild Farquhar Middle School without busing students half way across the county in the process. Our solution was unique, using undeveloped parkland next door to become the new school site, swapping that land for the existing school site which then becomes a park. We called it the 'Farquhar Land-Swap,' and it took an amazing amount of effort from a lot of people to see it through to final approval by MCPS and M-NCPPC. We learned some great lessons along the way, both positive and negative, which we share below for others considering civic action.

Must-Do List:

Get a Crew: You'll need to attend a lot of meetings and people can only be in one place at a time – if they're even available. Our 'core' group was 14 people, who all played key roles at various times. The best crew is one that brings unique viewpoints and talents to your cause.

Recruit Allies – We worked very hard to get a number of endorsements from State Senators, Delegates, County Council Members, HOAs and others. Try to get written endorsements (and offer to help write them to save people time) that you can save and share.

Keep it Simple: Our issue included a lot of complexities in zoning law and school policies that required hours of learning on our part. Don't think others will instantly 'get' what's taken you a long time to learn. Focus on the big picture and speak simply.

Communicate with Your Supporters: We used a great product (GroupSpaces.com) to host our own website and send emails to a list of supporters. Again, we kept communications simple and short to keep people focused, and only asked them to send emails to MCPS or the Planning Board when truly necessary. We also provided 'suggested language' for emails to make expressing support quick and easy.

A One-Pager and a Grab-and-Go: We created a one-page simple handout showing the benefits of our proposed land-swap to multiple constituencies, using photos and graphics. Extra details were on the back of the page. We also had a 15 page 'Grab and Go' PowerPoint presentation that we could quickly edit and take with us to show multiple audiences on a moment's notice.

Be Nice: Civil Servants and Politicians are just like you and me, and they don't react kindly to people wagging fingers in their face or hearing, "I pay your salary and you'll do what I say!" Most of these people want to help the community, and react very well to being treated with kindness and respect.

Recognize People: The crew and your supporters deserve recognition, either formal or informal. Your allies should be recognized as well. Thank you letters, award nominations, and letters of commendation are all good ways to do this.

Don't-Do List

Don't put anything in email that you'd mind seeing in the Washington Post – Email is convenient and easy, but it's also easily forwarded and permanent. Most emails with public agencies are also subject to Public Information Act requests or made public as part of staff reports.

Don't give politicians or senior administrators unbounded problems – give them solutions to support – These are BUSY people, and asking them to spend time figuring out a solution to your problem won't be productive. Asking them to support your position or plan (again, clearly and simply stated!) is a much better use of their influence and time.

Don't Underestimate Your Opposition – If you have determined opposition, keep tabs on them, show up at the meetings they go to, and don't give them a free ride. Rebut them every chance you can, in person and in writing.

Don't Turn Disagreements Into Blood Feuds: We made this mistake early by judging a minor opponent's position as "the craziest idea we'd heard yet." Just those words turned that person into a major opponent, who went so far as to send a letter to the Board of Education falsely stating a major civic association's position on our issue!

Don't Have an All-or-Nothing Attitude or You May Get It: In a county as populous and complex as Montgomery County, negotiation and compromise are required to get anything done. Our school design had to be reworked multiple times to accommodate neighbor's concerns and 'rustic roads guidelines.' If we or MCPS had been inflexible, the whole project might have failed approval by M-NCPPC. As it turns out, we offered to compromise with our opposition early on and they refused, and they ended up with a much worse situation (for them) than our initial compromise position.

Our little effort started out as a reaction to a plan to bus our students half way across the county for two years while our school was rebuilt. Given our geography, that meant three hour daily bus rides for a lot of kids. We were MAD. We were AGAINST something. But, we came up with a plan that ultimately gave the community a lot of side benefits, and suddenly we were FOR something. Promoting something good (if you can) is always preferable than angrily opposing something bad. This may not apply to all civic action, but it is something to consider and strive towards.

Finally, understand that things can take a LONG time to ultimately be resolved. We thought our effort would be over in four months, but it actually took three years! Don't let the process wear you down. You may think all of the procedures, required notification periods, approval chains, and management layers you uncover are totally crazy, but it's the price of living in a democracy.

Winston Churchill once said in 1947, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." He was right, and Montgomery County is a great place to live because of all of these democratic processes, not in spite of them.

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