

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - July 17, 2014

Leapfrogging is not just for kids

by Carole Ann Barth
MCCF Immediate Past President

The pace of innovation and technological change keeps picking up speed. Government, however, is like a huge ocean liner; it does not change course quickly or easily. This is why leapfrogging has become an important concept in the quest for a more nimble bureaucracy. The following is an example.

In the 1990s, Prince George's County invented bioretention (or engineered rain gardens), and pioneered the concept of Low Impact Development (using small-scale, distributed facilities like rain gardens to capture and treat stormwater at the point of generation). These techniques perform better than conventional stormwater management, cost less, and are more flexible. But despite all the benefits of Low Impact Development (LID), and even after twenty-plus years of experience, it is still not utilized to its full potential in the DC metropolitan region. For that, we need to look to the west coast--to Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington.

Twenty years ago, our region had regulators, planners, engineers, contractors and developers who were trained and experienced in stormwater management ponds. LID, however, required a paradigm shift. In hindsight, it is not surprising that many of these experts resisted the new approach to stormwater. Like generals fighting the last war, they continued to act as their experience and training dictated. Thus it has been a long, slow process to move from centralized, regional stormwater management to small-scale, site-specific, distributed controls.

In contrast, Oregon and Washington states did not have a long history of stormwater management. They were just beginning to develop programs at the time that LID was created. With no big investment in conventional stormwater management, they were able to leapfrog past it and enthusiastically embrace the new technology instead.

So how can our leaders intentionally practice leapfrogging? It starts with paying attention to innovations. For example, Las Vegas has invested in advanced signalization controls which enable traffic planners to adjust the length of green lights in real time to respond to traffic tie-ups. For a fraction of the cost of adding road capacity, this has had a tremendous impact in reducing congestion. So, advanced signalization is an innovation worth adopting.

However, instead of doing exactly what Las Vegas did, we could take advantage of more recent technology. Rather than investing in road sensors to monitor congestion, we could tap into the data now available from GPS-enabled cars and phones. Thus we could realize the benefits of Las Vegas' innovation at an even lower cost and have an even more flexible and responsive system. Clearly, this is an issue on which local governments in our region could benefit us all by leapfrogging.

I am willing to bet that readers of this column can come up with many other potential leapfrog opportunities. How about it? Let us challenge our leaders to leap forward instead of plodding bravely into the past. Send your ideas to me, Carole Barth, at the Civic Federation email address--montgomerycivic@yahoo.com--and we will see if we can stimulate some leapfrog action.

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