

"Federation Corner" column
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How civic groups improve our lives

by Jim Humphrey
member, MCCF Executive Committee

This week's column is an update of one that was first published in August 2006, but the topic bears repeating.

A friend once wrote to ask why her community should have a neighborhood citizens association. The following is the reply I emailed to her.

In the United States, our representative democracy was designed as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." And, in Montgomery County, our neighborhood citizens associations and local homeowners associations are the most basic units of that form of government. 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.

But, the voice of the people in Montgomery County--even with a population of a million people--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 community, often make large contributions to local political campaigns that result in their having special access to elected officials and influence over the decisions of our government. As a result, ninety years ago neighborhood citizens groups decided to join together as 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 issues before the county government. The Federation is akin to a congress of neighborhood citizen groups that allows residents to speak to the county government in a unified voice, attempting to balance the influence of special interests. Its mission is a simple one: to sustain and improve the quality of life for the residents of the county. To find out more about the Civic Federation, or to download a membership application form, check out the group's website at montgomerycivic.org.

Just as voting is important to the health of a representative democracy so is participation in the functioning of government, an activity which often begins on the local level. 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 citizens groups often have working committees that are usually in need of volunteers--so, sign up to help. An Education Committee could work with local PTAs to insure your kids get a good quality education. To investigate and provide input on development planned for within or on the borders of your community, you might

establish a Land Use Committee. And a Traffic and Safety committee can work toward limiting vehicular 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 their regional Citizens Advisory Board, in order to share their local issues of concern with others in the broader community.

In addition to the contribution made by neighborhood associations toward a well functioning democracy through the conduct of business in regular meetings of the membership, these groups can also help meet the social and service needs of a healthy community. My citizens association 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 through our local streets to a party locale where they are treated to popsicles. These events and others bring us together informally, and help in welcoming 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 the local elementary school. And our newsletter and website keep members current on the official and social news, advertise the babysitting, lawn care and other services provided by our neighbor teens, and strengthen 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 in this case a community citizens group, to help elderly neighbors who might need assistance with household chores, to lend a helping hand to single-parent families, to grieve over our losses, and to take pride in our accomplishments.

Montgomery County has a long tradition of neighborhood citizens associations, and they help create in each of us a sense of belonging and 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