

“Federation Corner” column

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And now budget season

By Paula Bienenfeld

Budget season. How will your elected representatives spend your tax dollars? Our March 9th Civic Fed General Meeting will be on the County budget and Joe Beach, the Director of the County’s Finance Department, and Steve Farber, Staff Director at the County Council, will go through the proposed budget.

It’s always an interesting evening. So, sharpen your pencils and let’s read the budget. There will be lots of time for Q&A.

At that same meeting we are honored to be awarding Jim Turner with the Civic Federation’s Community Hero Award for the work he did to stop County Executive Leggett’s proposed Independent Transit Authority (ITA). Mr. Turner had the brilliant idea of starting a petition to halt this ill-advised bill. Within days he had hundreds, and then over one thousand, signatures on the petition, which had a simple statement: Stop the MC 24-15 tax-and-spend power grab now! His petition clearly laid out the reasons to stop bill MC24-15: “The ITA bill removes limits for increasing property taxes.” “The bill disenfranchises voters and gives private interests new governing powers.” “The bill is fiscally irresponsible.” And, “The ITA bill process lacks transparency.” We hope our County Delegation, Mr. Leggett and the County Council understand now that the residents of this county do not want an Independent Transit Authority. Not now. Not ever. Stick a fork in it, Mr. Leggett.

If for some unfathomable reason Mr. Leggett, the Council, and the Delegation do not remember how the residents of this county feel about the ITA, and a zombie ITA comes back from the grave, the petition is here: <https://www.change.org/p/delegate-shane-robinson-stop-the-mc-24-15-tax-and-spend-power-grab-now>.

The Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) budget, of \$2.4Billion, is another focus of the Civic Fed. Last week, together with the Montgomery County Taxpayers League and the Parents’ Coalition of Montgomery County, we held our Third Annual Budgetpalooza! Volunteers from the community went through the proposed Fiscal Year (FY)16 Operating Budget, chapter by chapter. Joan Fidler, President of the Taxpayers League, presented an overview of the entire budget, followed by Taxpayers League Vice President Gordie Brenne, former MCPS Board of Education candidate Ed Amatetti, Civic Fed First Vice President Jim Zepp, Civic Fed At-Large member Jean Cavanaugh, and Civic Fed member Stephen Brown, each of whom did the deep dive into the budget chapters. Thank you all! We also thank Board of Education member Jill Ortman-Fouse, and Thomas Klausung, the MCPS Director of Management, Budget and Planning for attending and providing comments and observations on the budget. Brigitta Mullican, a candidate for the Rockville City Council, was also there.

Some general observations from the Budgetpalooza! analyses: first, productivity benchmarks are missing or poorly identified. As we have observed in years past, ‘Red Zone’ (Focus) elementary school teachers are paid 4% less and have lower math and reading scores in their classes than ‘Green Zone’ teachers. Second, there is a pattern of decentralization occurring. This leads to redundancy of tasks,

and an increasing lack of oversight. The deep dive into Chapter 8, the Office of the Chief Operations Officer Budget, by Mr. Brenne, showed that there are no productivity or comparative benchmark data provided to justify costs presented in that chapter. As one question, why are there 1,258 buses? And, how do these costs for various functions compare to other large school systems, for example, Fairfax County? Mr. Brenne asked, when will a study be made public showing an analysis of how productivity could be increased by shared services with the county, for example, with bus mechanics? The County Council has the opportunity and the responsibility to get answers to these questions. We hope before they approve the MCPS budget they do so.

Finally, we want to remind everyone that our Annual Awards Banquet is coming this May. Please watch our website and newsletters for information on venue, and how to purchase tickets. As we enter our 90th year, we are planning a wonderful celebration.

Each year at the Banquet we present three awards, the Star Cup, the Sentinel Award, and the Wayne Goldstein Award. The Star Cup, our oldest award, was first presented in 1926, to Oliver Owen Kuhn, a founding member of the community of Oakmont, and the Oakmont Citizens Committee. Mr. Kuhn was the managing editor of the Evening Star. The Sentinel Award owes its name to this venerable newspaper, and is awarded to an individual or group, outside of government, for a significant contribution to 'good government' at the local level. In 2008 the Civic Fed presented the late Bernard Kapiloff, and Lynn Kapiloff, now the CEO and Publisher of The Sentinel, with an honorary Civic Federation membership "in appreciation for their support of the Federation and the civic community." The Citizens Referendum on Over-development was the first group to receive the Sentinel Award, in 1989. Some things never change.

Finally, the Wayne Goldstein Award recognizes the public service contributions of an individual or group in Montgomery County. The first awardee of the then-Journal Cup award was Allen Bender, in 1984. The award name was changed to celebrate the life of Wayne Goldstein, Civic Fed past president and a continuing inspiration for our civic community.

Do you know of a worthy individual or organization in Montgomery County who deserves an award? Our civic activists contribute hundreds of hours of their time, and donate money every year to fight for the quality of life we hope to enjoy in the county. Please let us know of someone, or some organization deserving of one of these awards.

And come to the banquet to celebrate their accomplishments and enjoy an evening with your fellow civic activists.

Meanwhile we will see you at our Civic Fed meeting this Monday, March 9th, at the County Council Office Building, First Floor Auditorium, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville.