

“Federation Corner” column
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The future of transportation now

By Paula Bienenfeld

What can the future of transportation look like in our county? Our monthly program focuses on an issue that has been discussed in Montgomery County over many years.

As Jim Zepp, our First Vice President writes in our April newsletter, transportation – transportation now, not the future – is changing radically. Autonomous, or ‘self-driving’ cars are a reality.

Vehicle-to-vehicle (V2V) communication is happening now. Electric cars are on the roads now. Apps that summon public transit exist now, not someday in the future. Traffic lights that change when sensing changes in congestion exist now. Must we be planning – and paying billions -- for diesel-fueled, fixed-rail bus systems then? No, not really. We envision a modern, 21st-century transportation system in the county. To cut through the propaganda, the astro-turfing, and the fake PR twitter accounts, and have a fact-based discussion, Jim has organized the April Civic Fed meeting, ‘*Transportation’s Future – Today and Tomorrow.*’

The meeting will be Monday, April 13th, at 7:45 pm, at the County Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville, in the First Floor Auditorium. The program is free and open to the public.

Our guest speakers will be representatives from the U.S. Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Beyond Traffic Project and the Intelligent Transportation Systems-America (ITSA), and Christof Spieler, a Houston, Texas METRO Board Member, structural engineer, professional planner and, wait for it, transit user, who will offer his highlights via Skype on how the data-driven transformation of Houston’s transit service has dramatically improved local bus service -- at no additional cost to taxpayers.

As Jim points out, “Emerging technological and innovative approaches that manage traffic demand are being recognized as having the potential to reduce congestion while using existing transportation resources.

These include sensor arrays and real-time computer control of traffic signals that reroute or delay vehicles from congestion points; congestion pricing and incentive programs that encourage drivers to avoid peak rush hour times or routes; and automated vehicle controls that prevent accidents, minimize vehicle spacing while maximizing speeds, and optimize routing choices. A subset of these methods is called Intelligent Transportation Systems, or ITS.”

This past February US DOT put out their Blue Paper, ‘Beyond Traffic: Trends and Choices 2045.’ They paint two scenarios for 2045: one with which we are all familiar: stuck in traffic, waiting for the next cycle to make that turn, or waiting for the crowded metro, in effect, ‘a fossil system;’ or, a second: where electric buses can travel endlessly because they receive their fuel wirelessly; where driverless cars zoom around and car crashes are a thing of the past, as accidents are avoided by smart cars that anticipate movement and traffic patterns.

In the preface to the Blue Paper, Secretary Foxx wrote, “Beyond Traffic is intended to open a national dialogue about what our country really needs and why we need it. It is a draft survey of major forces impacting transportation and a discussion of potential solutions that can be adopted to address those forces. We hope it prompts a long-overdue national conversation. We also hope it generates a lot of thoughtful feedback to inform the final version.”

The Blue Paper touches on the dramatic technological transformation transportation is undergoing now. This is not the future; these technologies are in the works and in some cases on the street, now. According to the Blue Paper,

“Three distinct but related streams of technological change and development are occurring simultaneously: in-vehicle crash avoidance systems that provide warnings and/or limited automated control of safety functions; connected vehicle technologies—vehicle-to-vehicle (V2V) and vehicle-to-infrastructure (V2I) communications that support various crash avoidance applications; and self-driving vehicles.”

For this Blue Paper, the federal government wrote, ‘Everyone uses our transportation system, which means anyone can help build its future. We want to hear from you.’

Ok, at this point my head is spinning. A government agency wants to hear from us? Clearly in this the federal government is also light years away from Montgomery County’s closed ‘in the bubble’ approach. But that’s why we have the Civic Fed.

And, to share your ideas, go here to complete a brief form <http://www.dot.gov/BeyondTraffic/ShareYourIdeas>, or email DOT at BeyondTraffic@dot.gov. I wish I could provide a similar way to get your ideas to our county DOT, but that doesn’t exist. Maybe in 2045.

Meanwhile, the technology is here and the choice is ours. Come to the meeting and make your voice heard.

Update on our June 5th Awards Banquet

The Civic Fed Executive Committee is hard at work on the plans for our annual awards and Awards Banquet. The nominations process is underway. The Nominations Period has closed and the Executive Committee and Awards Committee are reviewing the nominees now.

Meanwhile, please check our website and newsletter for information on reservation purchase. The Banquet will be held the evening of Friday, June 5th, at Tony Lin’s, conveniently located off both the Rockville Pike and Randolph Road. We look forward to seeing you there as we celebrate both the nominees and our 90th Anniversary.