

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel, 07 May 2015

History of Montgomery County Civic Federation

By Charles Wolff

By the 1920s, the rapid growth of Washington's suburban bedroom communities had created dozens of locally- focused civic groups. But a single event in 1925 galvanized the inner suburbs and led to the urgent birth of the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) to focus on broader issues.

The story involves the dominant Washington newspaper of the day, *The Evening Star*, and a landowner from a famous family who was a major figure in Montgomery County and the State. Many civic groups near Friendship Heights, Bethesda, and Silver Spring sprang into action because of a secretive deal that would have given a private company the power of eminent domain (i. e., to seize large amounts of land of its own choosing and pay for it later).

This report is based on my research at the Library of Congress. It is preceded by some personal comments on the 1920's. Square brackets enclose references to *The Evening Star* newspaper.

-----THE TIMES -----

There was a great lifting of spirits after the end of World War I, whose demoralizing trench warfare was prolonged and especially deadly. Optimism and investment soared, especially in the stock market, which came to resemble a casino. The Dow Jones Industrial Average nearly quadrupled from 1920 until the 1929 crash.

It was appropriately called "The Roaring Twenties". President Coolidge famously answered, "The business of America is business". In such an atmosphere, proposals to build something were greeted with a presumption that whatever it was, it was probably a good thing.

Socially, the 1920's saw young adults further abandoning Victorian customs. In this respect the decade was a short-lived, mini-prelude to the more consequential 1960's. Youthful exploration of freedom spurred one of the most energy-intensive dances, the Charleston, whose female participants were called "flappers". Not everyone was pleased.

In more traditional circles, "Women's Leagues" were a big part of civic activity. They financed ongoing charity programs for people in severe need and broadly advocated for community betterment. Their work was frequently reported in Washington's citywide newspapers---an attention that we would covet in vain today. Many neighborhood civic associations also existed. Often they were created by the developer of a housing tract to use as a bragging point when selling the houses.

In sum, the times were optimistic and economically vigorous, except on the farms. It was harder to prevent someone's flawed idea of "progress" than it is today. Montgomery County had no zoning laws or Planning Board in 1925. Unwelcome proposals were addressed in far-off Baltimore or Annapolis, or just tolerated.

-----THE BELT LINE -----

A new company had managed to extract a tremendous benefit from the Corporation Commission of Virginia while remaining completely out of public view. They obtained the right of eminent domain to lay out a right-of-way for a freight railroad called "The Belt Line". It would start north from Alexandria, cross the Potomac River south of Glen Echo near the D. C. border. Then it would proceed through Maryland inside today's Capital Beltway to surround 2/3 of the District of Columbia.

The "Washington and Loughborough Belt Line and Terminal Co." had no timid plan. They wanted nothing less than to change the Washington area's overwhelming dependence on the federal government. They hoped to make this region a "national transportation center and a self-sustaining commercial city" that could survive even without the existing federal activities [19 Jul 1925, p. 6]. The initial node of activity in Maryland was to be located roughly between the Potomac River and River Road within one mile of the D. C. boundary.

Specific goals for this location were to:

1. Build a new rail bridge over the Potomac south of Glen Echo in Maryland.
2. Relieve alleged rail congestion with a huge switching yard near the Potomac and a new bypass of D. C.
3. Create a commercial center with warehouses, freight depots, and refrigeration plants.
4. Vigorously induce "light manufacturing plants and other industrial projects to locate there".

The freight line in Maryland would pass near Bradley Hills, Somerset, and between Chevy Chase and Kensington. Then it ran by Silver Spring (between Forest Glen and Woodside) and onto Takoma Park and Prince Georges County. The entire route hugged close to the D. C. line but never inside because D. C. zoning banned its uses.

-----BELT LINE ISSUES-----

The main issue, of course, was that Maryland suburbs close to Washington were then residential with almost no commercial activity. Quiet bedroom communities were horrified at the thought of frequent freight trains rumbling by and feared their property values would plummet. The belt line company argued that its line would not "tend in any way to destroy or harm outlying residential property" [26 Jul 1925, p. 16]. The company added that they were the largest landowner (2000 acres) along the affected route and most of their land was slated for fine residential development. Why would they degrade their own property?

There were other issues. Was there really a rail congestion problem in Washington that needed solving? The Pennsylvania and B & O railroads would later say that there was no current or foreseeable need. Also, many houses and land parcels would have to be condemned because a rail line cannot make sharp turns around obstacles. Finally, did citizens want to convert the suburbs to a more commercial or industrial character?

Additional development was anticipated along the line in Virginia and Maryland after the full belt line was completed.

-----SECRETIVE PROCESS-----

Permission for the Belt Line was a done deal in Virginia when its citizens eventually heard of it. Later, the Washington Chamber of Commerce would be told “how the project was railroaded through the Corporation Commission of Virginia and left citizens of the latter state no redress except an appeal to a body of a sister state” [2 Sep 1925, page 1].

The audacious plan came to light on 17 July, 1925 when the Evening Star reported that the company had petitioned the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) for permission to exercise its charter rights as granted by Virginia. Would interstate reciprocity encourage Maryland to ratify the Belt Line’s right of eminent domain?

The precedent of the Virginia Corporation Commission was not encouraging. Virginia had approved the belt line quietly, even though they must have known the populace would be angry when finally aware. [“Virginians Join Fight on Belt Line”, 22 Aug 1925, p. 2]

The same secretive rush job seemed set up for Maryland. Our PSC had scheduled a public hearing (and maybe immediate approval of the project) only six days after their perfunctory notice in the Montgomery Advocate (Rockville). That notice was the very first time the public learned that this freight line around Washington had been proposed. [23 Jul 1925, p. 1]

People back then knew they had a lot to fear. In their not-too-distant past, railroads could seize land from mid-continent to the Pacific Ocean. They had seen belt lines built around several eastern cities. Montgomery County residents knew they would need widespread protests and need some powerful or very influential supporters. Fortunately, two remarkably well located individuals stood up and took action.

To be concluded next month

- MAJOR SUPPORTERS
- MASS MEETINGS
- CIVIC GROUPS UNITE
- MFFC OFFICERS & EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS