

“Federation Corner” column

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A History of MCCF's 'Orphaned Roads' Project

By Peggy Dennis

In 2008, County Executive Ike Leggett made a surprise visit to the Montgomery County Civic Federation's January meeting. He presented the MCCF with a handsome, framed certificate “in Recognition and Appreciation of your valuable work to research and chart policy alternatives for Montgomery County's Orphaned Roads.” This surprise visit did not make it into the Washington Post or any newspapers. So, how did this honor come about? It is a “long story” but one well worth telling.

My road, Fawsett Road, in Potomac was created in 1945. Back then, a land owner who wanted to subdivide his property and sell off lots could do so with minimal investment in infrastructure. A road accessing lots and future homes could be nothing more than a dirt track. Our road was created by Howard Fawsett in the Fawsett Farms subdivision. Fawsett probably used nothing more than his tractor with a plow blade to widen the track that ended just short of one of the many, long-abandoned gold mines in this area. The 1,550 foot long cul-de-sac was dedicated to the County in 1947.

Over the years, home were built and residents moved in. We pooled money to pay for truckloads of gravel to be spread every few years and a snow plow contract. When there were only a few homes, minimal traffic and little stormwater runoff, the road was tolerable. But as the road aged, people began to want something better. In the 1960s, a group asked the County's Department of Transportation (DOT) to pave the road. They were told that not only would they have to repay the County for the project, but the cost was estimated to be 1 million dollars – a price too heavy to bear for only 18 property owners.

In the early 1990s, Howie Denis was our District 1 Councilman. He met with a group of homeowners who still wanted to pursue the illusive dream of a real road, then went to bat for us. DOT told him that it was impossible to do anything for Fawsett Road because DOT didn't know how many roads in a similar condition existed in the County, nor how much it would cost to improve them and accept responsibility for their future maintenance. Mr. Denis put \$250,000 into the budget to hire a consultant to provide that information.

In 2005, my husband and I were approached by the builder planning to build four homes on four of the last undeveloped lots. The Department of Permitting Services was requiring the developer to construct the first 100 feet of Fawsett Road to County standards and to put a stormwater swale along our frontage and a culvert under our driveway. We agreed hoping that it might be a first step toward further improvements along the rest of the road.

I'm a busy body, and I watched the road construction progress with interest. One day, I stopped to talk with the County roads inspector. He looked down our road and said, “I can't believe your road is in this condition!” I explained its history and about the reason for the \$250,000 in the budget. He snorted in disbelief and said that DOT knew what they had in their inventory. All they had to do was study the “MAARS Report.” “MAARS Report” I asked? “Yeh,” he replied: the Maryland Accident Analysis Reporting System. “Just call my boss and ask to see the MAARS Report!”

Mr. Anderson was loath to let me look at this document. First, he said DOT didn't have it. Then he admitted that it was there but said I couldn't see it. When I pointed out that it was a public document, he explained that it was an old, printed copy, and he didn't want me to see it. A challenge! I emailed Arthur Holmes, the Director of DOT, and complained that I was not being allowed to see public information. The next day Mr. Anderson called me and invited me in.

The next day I turned up at DOT with lined tablet in hand. The MAARS Report for Montgomery County turned out to be the old fashioned computer print outs - about 4 inches of them. It contained detailed information on every publicly dedicated road in the County and who was responsible for its maintenance: the Feds, State, County or an amorphous group maintained by "others". I started at the beginning (alphabetically) with the "A" roads and wrote down each road that was supposedly "maintained by others." Just the "A"s took all afternoon. A mugs game! But I had the presence of mind to note down the name of the State Highway Administration office and phone number which produced the Report. The next day I called that office and asked very politely if they could send me electronically just the data covering the roads "maintained by others." They were delighted to help me out, and 15 minutes later I had what I needed in my computer. My husband massaged the data and gave me an alphabetical listing. Working together, we took the ADC Map for the County and highlighted each road on its map grid. Map 2 showed Hyattstown and Prescott Roads in the Little Bennett Regional Park. But that was just the start, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

To be continued.