

"Federation Corner" column
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Federation discusses positions on transportation projects

by Dan Wilhelm
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Have you ever complained about road congestion? Have you ever opposed a development because it would increase congestion? I expect that most, if not all people involved in citizens' groups answer affirmative to both questions.

Did you know that Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) has taken positions on a long list of transportation projects and policies that directly strive to reduce the level of congestion? At our program on Monday, June 9, I will review our positions related to transportation and provide updates as to what has happened since our last update, which took place ten years ago.

The Civic Federation spent four years of intense effort dealing with transportation projects and policy issues in the 1999 to 2003 time frame. This started with active participation in the Planning Board's Transportation Policy Report (TPR) task force by two MCCF members--Stan Schiff and myself. The task force developed and presented its report to the Planning Board, which evolved into a report to the County Council.

MCCF considered the TPR recommendations and took positions at nearly every monthly meeting in 2002 and in an all-day Saturday session. This effort continued into 2003 when the Federation put on a program that was aired on county cable television. MCCF also had a follow-up program in 2004 that reviewed all positions taken in 2002 and 2003.

Since it has been 10 years since our transportation positions were taken, and many people within the Civic Federation were not active in 2004, a review of prior positions is over-due. Nearly all the projects are in various master plans. Thus, the positions taken in 2002-2003 are still relevant.

The old saying that "there are no new ideas under the sun" applies to ways to address road congestion. Also, a very fast implementation schedule which includes a project in a master plan is still likely to take ten years to reach completion.

The June program will identify the more than one hundred positions taken during the 2002-2003 timeframe and provide an update on what has happened since then. The Federation membership can always decide to change our previously taken positions, but the starting point for that process is to understand what positions were already taken and why they were taken.

The positions taken back in 2002-2003 fall into three major categories: road, transit and land use policies. The majority of the policies relate to land-use: the county move to Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and balancing jobs and housing on a regional basis. Please plan on attending for an informative review and robust discussion.

Then, in the business portion of the agenda following the program, Federation members will consider a resolution urging shared use paths in Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) transmission corridors, which is being sponsored by delegate Peggy Dennis. Last year, she initiated a dialogue with PEPCO in which she asked that the company consider allowing a shared use path for bicycles and pedestrians along their property and transmission lines between Westlake Road near Montgomery Mall and Piney Meetinghouse Road in western Potomac.

PEPCO's response to her request was a firm "no". So she took the issue to the County Executive's Pedestrian/Bicycle Traffic Safety Advisory Committee which was supportive. The Advisory Committee established a working group, and a resolution in support of this objective was passed at their meeting on May 1. A similar resolution was passed unanimously by the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board on May 19.

This is timely, according to Ms. Dennis, because we have a chance to promote a positive outcome by exerting pressure on the Maryland Public Service Commission while it is deliberating whether to approve the corporate merger of PEPCO and Exelon Corporation. We did not have this leverage earlier while dealing solely with PEPCO. The Executive Committee approved the following resolution, which you will see has been broadened to apply to more than the single transmission lines right-of-way between west Bethesda and Potomac. Ms. Dennis is asking that the members of the Federation vote in support of this resolution at our meeting on June 9:

"Whereas the connectivity of safe routes for bicyclists and pedestrians is increasingly important as non-vehicular means of transportation are adopted;

"Whereas gas and electric distribution lines cross the county in relatively straight lines with no traffic intruding;

"Whereas PEPCO and the Exelon Corporation are seeking approval for their merger;

"Therefore, be it resolved that the Montgomery County Civic Federation urges the County Council and the County Executive to communicate to the Maryland Public Service Commission that the establishment of a shared use path solely for non-vehicular use along PEPCO's transmission lines in Montgomery County is a desirable objective and one which should be considered as a public benefit when debating approval of the proposed merger."

NOTE: the June 9 meeting of the Civic Federation will be held in the first floor auditorium of the County Council Building in Rockville, and begin at 7:45 p.m. As noted above, the program will be on detailing Federation positions of record on county transportation projects. As always, the public is invited and encouraged to attend.

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