

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Including citizens in government decisions**

by Karen Roper

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Five years ago I would never have dreamed that the community, developers, the advisory board and urban district could cooperate on anything. By a fluke of fate, my community was given an opportunity to collaborate with a developer of a commercial property which abuts a residential neighborhood of single family homes. The success of this collaboration led our community to pioneer a process of community inclusion which I call **Micro to Macro**©.

This is not about stopping development, but rather negotiating with a developer on reconfiguring the massing and design of a project. By working with the developer and doing some old fashion "horse trading," we were able to mitigate some of the impacts and were successful in making the project more compatible with our community in East Silver Spring.

Like other downcounty communities bordering urban areas, the allowable heights, densities and set-backs for new developments in East Silver Spring were established in Master Plans and Sector Plans years before any development was proposed. When a developer presents a proposed new project, it is not unusual for the community to be unaware of and then shocked by the size of residential and mixed use projects allowed only ten feet from their single family homes. Our community was no different.

It all started with a call from Council member Marc Elrich. A developer, who had already obtained approval for a 60' condominium on the commercial border next to a single family home, wanted to change his development and build a hotel instead. Since the hotel was limited to 45' in height, the developer wanted a Zoning Text Amendment (ZTA) to include a hotel in the definition of housing so that it could be built to the full 60' zone maximum. Council member Elrich suggested that in exchange for supporting the ZTA, the community might negotiate with the developer to get some concessions that the community desired (i.e.; first floor retail, a greater setback from the home next door, etc.).

East Silver Spring Citizen's Association (ESSCA) formed a committee of neighbors who would be directly impacted (micro), which prevailed in getting the developer to provide more first floor retail and a very large and well defined setback transition from the single family home next door, in exchange for our support of the ZTA. A contract was written and signed by the ESSCA President and the developer. The developer and a community representative went to the Planning Board and County Council together to petition for the needed ZTA. We won support from both entities, neither of which had ever seen this kind of cooperation between a developer and a community.

Under current County regulations, developers are required to present their conceptual plans and collect citizen input at public meetings and advisory boards. However, developers have no incentive to incorporate any input from the community and, understandably, continue to present their plans to various advisory boards until they find a board which supports their project without changes.

The Advisory Boards, Chamber of Commerce and others in the wider community have very broad goals for development projects (e.g.; housing, office space, retail, etc.), and they usually vote to support every project. Even when members of these Boards sympathize with the concerns of immediate neighbors, opposing the project seems too drastic compared to the seemingly minor issues of the impacted neighbors. The developer has no motive to negotiate with the community after he wins the support of the Advisory Boards.

This illusion of inclusion polarizes the community, the Advisory Boards, and decision making bodies and characterizes the community as “opposing all development” and others as “supporting all development at any cost.”

The **Micro to Macro**© process was really put to the test with a second, much larger development which involved a committee of two dozen neighbors. The first step was to convince the Silver Spring Citizens' Advisory Board (SSCAB) and the Urban District Board to refrain from voting to support the project until after the community had finished negotiating a deal with the developer. Their cooperation was essential, as the developer had tried to play us against each other on more than one occasion. We kept these Boards informed and they kept their promise not to vote until we were done.

As Chair of the neighbors' committee, I conferred often with Planning Staff, DOT, etc. to insure that they would approve the changes we were discussing. This was a very complicated project that involved three zones and four properties, and the staff was invaluable. We developed so close a working relationship that the Head Planner called us “the most sophisticated residents that he had ever worked with.”

Once we had the parameters of the deal worked out with the developer, the committee brought the concept to the civic association (first step out from Micro) for their vote. ESSCA voted overwhelmingly in favor of the deal. We then negotiated a contract that the developer and the President of ESSCA signed. With the contract signed, the various advisory boards (Macro) voted to support the project. Darian Unger, former Chair SSCAB Transportation and Pedestrian Safety Committee, remarked that “this is an example of a process that was thoughtful and well done.”

The Planning Staff recommended approval of both the ZTA and the project design. At the County Council and Planning Board hearings, the developer and community testified together in support of a ZTA and the project. We received unanimous support from both entities..

This is not an easy process and not all developers will want to cooperate. However, we believe our continued success is due to the willingness of all parties involved to try a different approach to community inclusion.

There are unlimited possibilities for the principles of the **Micro to Macro**© process to be applied to other decision making processes. **Micro to Macro**© acknowledges that the priorities of the government, various advisory boards and the immediate community are different, but that each has equal legitimacy. By organizing a queue for input, starting with the immediate neighbors (micro) and moving out to the broader community (macro), a process can successfully be created for all parties to work cooperatively and make compromises while respecting each other's priorities.

*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](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*