

“Federation Corner” column
The Montgomery Sentinel, 22 October 2015

Delphi Oracle is overrated

Written by Paula Bienenfeld

In the late 1960s the Rand Corporation developed what is known as the ‘Delphi’ method, named after the Delphic oracle, who prophesied the future. Rand’s ‘Delphi method’ was designed during the Cold War, originally to be used as a forecasting method wherein experts repeatedly answer a series of questions, with a facilitator summarizing the results. The idea is this event recurs and eventually a consensus can be reached. The theory is that decisions are more accurate coming from a groups structured in this way, rather than an unstructured group.

However, the ‘Delphic’ structure has now morphed into the go-to method for highly controlled meetings, particularly of the Montgomery County Planning Board. Each meeting has a very severe and controlled structure. The ‘experts’ from the Planning Board speak for 10-15 minutes about the plan which has clearly already been decided upon in internal meetings; they entertain a very limited number of questions, cut off any additional questions, and then force the attendees to divide and group themselves into small table groups, each one with a facilitator from the Planning Department, who will then tightly control the small group. The facilitator then writes comments on a large sheet of paper, and uses colored dots to choose the most ‘popular’ ideas from the small group. Once that portion of the meeting is concluded, one member of the carefully shepherded group ‘reports back’ to the entire group. The topics are limited and controlled and no other discussion is allowed.

This bastardized version of Rand’s ‘Delphi’ method has run its course and the last few meetings I have attended showed a willingness on the part of more residents and taxpayers to disrupt and demand a real discussion about the plans being forced on the citizens of Montgomery County. Good for them! Let’s not forget that we County taxpayers pay the Planning Department and they work for us, not the other way ‘round.

It is time for the residents of this county to make their displeasure known to the county council and to stop these farcical manipulative meetings. At the meetings I have attended lately people have left disgusted. Some comments: “I will NEVER vote for these people again.” “This is ridiculous.” “They won’t let us say anything.” “Why won’t they talk about XXX?”

Well, we are not alone. Other communities have had this same experience and have risen to the challenge. Here are some pointers for disrupting these meetings and creating a real discussion:

1. Stay focused! Don’t let the facilitators twist or denigrate your concerns.
2. Make sure your question gets answered. Smile and repeat the question over and over. Be friendly.
3. Be persistent!
4. Prepare. Make sure your friends and colleagues are also at the meeting. You already know how these meetings are run. Make sure you and your colleagues and friends are prepared to make your point and have your question answered. If the facilitator won’t answer your question, or

tries to isolate you as a troublemaker, make sure a colleague in the audience is ready to ask the same question; or point out, in a friendly way, that the question wasn't answered.

5. Videotape the meeting. These are public meetings and don't let anyone bully you into turning off your camera. All public meetings can be videotaped.

The Planning Board needs to move into the 21st century, with openness and transparency the call, and change the meeting formats so that they are open meetings where all discussion and questions are brought up and answered, to the satisfaction of the community. Until this happens frustration will mount.

And, as much as the County Council members might like to deny it or walk away, it is our elected councilmembers who appoint the members of the Planning Board. So, in effect, it is your elected council members who make sure this 'Delphi method' is being used across the county to shut down any opposition to plans being fomented in the Planning Department.

If you have attended one of these meetings and become disgusted with the format, email the county council to tell them so. Here is their email address: county.council@montgomerycountymd.gov And don't forget. Be persistent!

Upcoming:

Peter Franchot

Our next Civic Fed meeting will be held November 9th, at 7:45pm. We are honored to have Maryland State Comptroller Peter Franchot here to discuss the state finances and answer our questions. We hope all our members and friends can join us. The meeting is free and open to the public. The location is the County Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville, in the first floor auditorium.

2016 Budgetpalooza!

Our fourth annual Budgetpalooza! is coming in February and we are looking for volunteers to take a chapter or appendix of the MCPS FY17 Operating Budget which will be available on December 8th. Stay tuned!