

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - May 20, 2004

Looking for Efficient Government

by Cary Lamari
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Representation of the people, by the people, and for the people is something I seem to be writing a lot about lately. But I wonder if we truly appreciate just what this basic tenet of democracy means.

I was recently given a book by Jane Jacobs titled "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Jacobs asks, "how big should a district be to function effectively?" Her answer is big enough to fight city hall, yet not so big that neighborhoods cannot get their elected officials to pay attention to the interests of the general population. She states that if a district is too large, special interest groups or institutional concerns will override the interests of the general population. If a district is too small, she contends, it can become parochial in its outlook and ultimately work against itself.

Jacobs describes in detail districts of varying sizes around the country, and concludes that a district of approximately 100,000 people is optimal for a government to operate fairly and comprehensively. Her finding is consistent with the Charter Amendment petition initiated by the Civic Federation to achieve community-based representation by changing the composition of the County Council to all single-member council districts.

The number of county councilmembers would remain the same--nine--but they would all represent single districts, thus eliminating the countywide, at-large council seats.

Until 1990, the county council was composed of seven at-large council districts, with each member campaigning in and elected by the county at large. In the late 1980s, the Civic Federation undertook to change this composition with a petition to make all seven council members elected by and responsive to the voters of the individual districts. The present configuration was a compromise resulting in five single districts and four at-large, seats, presumably to balance parochial self-interests with broad, countywide needs.

But the fact is that it has become so costly to run a successful countywide campaign, few can afford to do so without substantial financial backing. It is also a fact that this financial backing comes not so much from the average citizenry, but primarily from Montgomery County's "big money" special interest group--a consortium comprised of the construction industry, developers, real estate and business interests. One only needs to visit the web site of Neighbors for a Better Montgomery (www.neighborspac.org) to see the nexus between campaign contributions in the 2002 County Council election and the direction in which our county is now headed.

We feel strongly that the present system has come to represent the short-term, profit-oriented desires of big business rather than the needs and long-term health and welfare of the majority of the county residents.

The intent of the charter amendment petition initiated by the Civic Federation is to continue in the direction we were headed in 1986, and take our county government once more toward a more democratic, community-based system of representation.

We believe that the nine single-member districts, each with a population base of about 100,000, will present greater opportunities for citizen participation. Because each district will be smaller, a broader base of candidates may choose to run for office. And with more accessible and accountable elected officials, county residents will be more likely to attend town meetings and hearings and bring problems to their "local" spokesperson.

Under this single-district system, the councilmembers will be more motivated to work toward solving the problems of their constituents, to whom they will be more directly accountable at election time. Our government must be fiscally, ethically, and legally committed to the residents and must work on their behalf.

The only way this will happen is if there is a better balance between special interests and community interests.

If you have not already taken copies of our petition to your local homeowner and civic associations, to your PTAs, to your neighbors, and any other county gathering to collect signatures, now is the time to do it. Copies of the petition, the resolution, and instructions can be downloaded from the Civic Federation's website at www.montgomerycivic.org, or call Dale Tibbitts at 301- 587-9358, Charles Wolff at 301-585-9744, or Peggy Dennis at 301-983-9738.

I am pleased to announce that our Volunteer Fire Chiefs have unanimously endorsed our charter amendment petition. I have also been told that the Green, Libertarian, and Republican parties support us. I am still working with the Democratic Party, and I am hopeful that they will come to recognize this initiative not as a "political" issue but as a means to achieve better governance.