

"Federation Corner" column
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Stick to the Charter property tax cap limit

by Dan Wilhelm
MCCF President

The following is the MCCF testimony presented to the County Council on April 5 concerning the proposed 2006 Operating Budget. Councilmember Silverman asking each group of speakers whether the Council should stick to the Charter Property Tax Limit and if yes then raise other taxes/fees, such as the energy tax. There were many questions on this subject from multiple councilmembers and statements for and against sticking to the limit. This is an important question for the Council that affects all county residents. The MCCF testimony follows:

"Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) realizes the proposed Operating Budget has funds for many programs that are important to one segment or another of Montgomery County citizens. Rather than focus on specific items, I will focus on four broad budget topics.

"First, the council needs to stay within the Charter property tax cap and not exceed it as has been done many times in recent years. Maintaining the cap will defuse ballot questions that attempt to replace the soft cap with a hard cap. The Council should exceed the cap only on rare occasions. Living within the cap will also give some relief to those whose property assessments increased greatly this year. Below are three efforts that will either increase revenue or make better use of the funds already being spent.

"Second, MCCF supports fully funding the maintenance of County infrastructure. The County needs to maintain its roads, buildings, and ball fields before adding new ones. Failure to maintain such facilities will lead to the need for increased funding for more extensive repairs or even premature replacement. Failure to maintain visible infrastructure gives the impression of a poorly run government. It also communicates to citizens the unwanted message that it acceptable for people to neglect their properties. MCCF has repeatedly urged the Council to provide sufficient funds for resurfacing roads and replacing bridges and continues to do so. Funds are also needed to replace HVAC systems, replace worn-out carpet and replace roofing. In order to address the maintenance of our parks that most citizens enjoy, we support the one cent funding increase requested by Park and Planning Board for this purpose. We note that this is not an increase but is simply the restoration of funding that was cut several years ago.

"Third, MCCF supports the addition of two staff members so that the Council can undertake detailed analysis of existing programs to evaluate their effectiveness. This evaluation would allow the Council to collect data about the total cost of a program rather than the incremental increases or decreases contained in the Operating Budget. Since employee compensation consumes such a large percentage of the budget, the area of total compensation should be one of the first areas addressed.

"Finally, one area that has fallen far behind is the need to address highway congestion. The major contribution the County makes to easing congestion is the provision of bus service. We continue to support the need for additional buses, which the Council has been adding little by little each year. We also continue to support the TPR recommendation that bus service could be restructured to a grid backbone network with small feeder buses. While the Executive Branch supports this concept, the implementation has been slow. This is a second area where the Council could address the program effectiveness."

MCCF 2005 Annual Awards Banquet - All welcome

Historically, MCCF has held a Holiday Reception in December for elected officials and presented its annual awards at the June membership meeting. This year we are trying a new format for combining these two events and holding it in May.

The Awards Banquet will be held on Friday, May 6, 2005, 6:00 to 9:30 p.m. at the New Fortune Restaurant, 16515 S. Frederick Avenue, Gaithersburg. The cost is only \$20 per person, or \$35 per couple. All are welcome. Mail your check payable to: Montgomery County Civic Federation, and mail to Luella Mast, Treasurer, 809 Hobbs Dr., Colesville, MD 20904. Along with the check, please identify the names of who is coming. If you have questions, please call Dan Wilhelm at 301-384-2698

A future article will identify those receiving the three awards and explain why they are being honored.