

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - November 30, 2006

Nameless intrigue surrounds Rockville library opening

by Wayne Goldstein

One of the more bizarre events in recent memory almost happened this week. A truthful rumor began circulating the Wednesday before Thanksgiving that there was a secret plan to name the Rockville Library for outgoing County Executive Douglas Duncan. A number of Rockville residents spent the weekend in various states of outrage that reached a critical mass on Monday. At the writing of this column, the current plan had been set aside although it is unclear who has the authority to decide the name of a public building and how the public would be allowed to participate in the process. Public outrage usually results from improper process rather than an unwanted result. Today in Montgomery County, as has been so since MCCF began in 1925, the people who live here want to be able to watch everything that their government does and want to be able to participate as much as possible in the government's work.

However, it wasn't just the secrecy that angered people. It was also the idea that the Rockville Library would become the Douglas M. Duncan Library. Why would hundreds of people perhaps have been prepared to go to the opening of this Library this past Wednesday and then walked out en masse in silent protest when that announcement was made? This is because Mr. Duncan worked as hard to stop the Rockville Library from being built as he worked to have other buildings built, such as Strathmore Hall and the Clarksburg Jail. There is a group called Friends of the Rockville Library. If there were another group called Enemies of the Rockville Library, Mr. Duncan would have been made an honorary member.

Consider these facts. Money for a new Rockville Library was first budgeted in 1983. The plan kept being moved further into the future every year until 1993, when it disappeared. Then Mr. Duncan brought it back in 1998, only to decide in 2000 that instead of following the common practice of designing the new library in one year and building it in two more years, he decided that it should take six years to do both. When surprised Rockville residents and officials asked for a faster timetable, having waited 17 years at that point, he told them they could instead add new space to the old library or move the library into a new commercial building that had just been built. Both ideas were ridiculed because the state wanted to use the old library site to build a new courthouse and people believed the standard commercial building would collapse from the unique situation caused by the weight of tens of thousands of books.

Mr. Duncan also suggested that if Rockville wasn't willing to wait then it could pay for the library itself and be reimbursed for its cost in due course. In other words, Mr. Duncan apparently thought that Rockville, with a \$56 million budget for 2000, was in a better position to pay for the library than Montgomery County, with its \$2.4 billion budget that year. He also said that Rockville could give land worth \$4.6 million to the county to get the library built more quickly. Structured parking was needed to serve the library and others who would live and work in the Town Center, but Mr. Duncan said that the city didn't need county money for parking and could just use parking lots.

Rockville even began to plan how to borrow the money to pay for the library before the County Council overruled Mr. Duncan's schemes that looked to be a cross between bait and switch and extortion, and provided the money for design and construction in three years. A real estate investment trust soon offered to build a new Rockville Town Center. Wanting to take full advantage of this opportunity, Rockville asked for time to pick the best design in the best location in the new Town Center, a delay that few residents objected to.

At the library's groundbreaking in January 2005, Mr. Duncan "said libraries are wonderful activity centers where people can come together. He praised the 'unwavering support' from the community that backed the

construction of a new central library." This period of diplomacy didn't last for long. When residents called for free library parking throughout the county earlier this year, Mr. Duncan joined that effort. Free parking in such a situation means that someone else must help pay interest on the construction bonds and pay for maintenance. Rockville was responsible to pay the bills, but it wanted the county to pay for the library parking at what would be a county facility. Mr. Duncan wanted the city to pay for this free parking, returning to his previous pattern of shifting financial responsibility from the county to the city.

In light of these facts, it should now be very clear why so many Rockville residents who care about their library were so outraged to learn that it would be named after the library's chief nemesis, Mr. Duncan. One of his strongest supporters, Councilmember George Leventhal, was the one who proposed the name change last week, citing Mr. Duncan's dedication to building the Rockville Library. He has now been informed of what Mr. Duncan tried to do to the project in 2000, so he may realize why such a naming proposal is so foolhardy and would expose Mr. Duncan to even more vitriol and ridicule than has been expressed these last few days. The smoke has yet to clear on what happened and why in the past week, but the truth of Mr. Duncan's intransigent behavior in 2000 and again this year will be his permanent record on this library. Should Mr. Leventhal remain intent to name a building for Mr. Duncan, he will do well to choose a building that Mr. Duncan really wanted to see built.

The truth may be that it could be some time before we can agree as to what Mr. Duncan did or didn't do during his 12 years as County Executive, or at least be able to discuss the subject with less passion. Right now, his name might be the wrong name in the wrong place at the wrong time. Let's wait a while and not try for an instant legacy perhaps seen by too many as built upon a foundation of hypocrisy and deceit.