

"The Federation Corner"

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On the death of a friend

Wayne Goldstein was a true civic leader in Montgomery County

by Jim Humphrey

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I was shocked and saddened this past Monday to learn that Wayne Goldstein, my friend and fellow civic activist, had died suddenly that morning. He had suffered a heart attack while walking in to the County Council Building in Rockville, to participate in a hearing on expansion plans for Suburban Hospital. It is always a shock when someone so vibrant and lively is taken so suddenly. But how appropriate, I thought, that he had left us while engaged in the activity that he enjoyed so much and did so well--advocating, as an unpaid volunteer, on behalf of the residents of Montgomery County.

After saying a silent prayer for his family and loved ones, my thoughts turned to the magnitude of the loss. Since the mid-1990s, Wayne had been a fixture in the civic community. The depth of his knowledge on issues ranging from land use and education, to the environment and historic preservation, and his experience in navigating the processes of local government were legendary.

Wayne would often call late in the evening to discuss some development project or zoning issue confronting one of the county's communities, usually after attending one or more public meetings earlier that evening. Who would I have those talks with now? If I was stumped as to what aspects of an issue should be focused on when drafting MCCF testimony for a hearing before the County Council or Planning Board, he always provided wise counsel, invariably suggesting an approach I had not considered. Who will provide that counsel now? And in those rare times of frustration, when the likelihood of a positive outcome on an issue made my involvement seem nearly pointless to me, Wayne was the person who had lifted my spirits and urged me to get back in the game. Who, I thought, will be my cheerleader now?

Over the past few days my phone line has been kept busy by community leaders from all over the county, calling to relate their shock and grief over the death of our friend and colleague. And in the sharing of stories with these callers, I came to realize that one of Wayne's most remarkable attributes was that each person I spoke with felt they had had a special relationship with Wayne...that their issues of importance had received particular attention from Wayne...that he had boosted their spirits at critical times by focusing solely on them. This quality was the more remarkable because he stayed so busy. As I would jokingly say to him, "wherever two or three county residents are gathered together to confront an issue that could negatively impact the quality of life in their neighborhood, you're there too--organizing, educating, and supporting their efforts."

And when Wayne was done for the day (attending all of the meetings or hearings he could cram into his schedule), and perhaps spent precious personal time visiting his mom or girlfriend, like many other civic activists I've known he would often stay up late into the night writing, researching, and responding to emails. I would sit amazed when receiving one of his research emails containing a list stretching yards in length of links to internet articles he'd found on a particular topic, with his personal notes tacked on each entry. A small example of the depth of his research was the 3-article series Wayne wrote as a Federation Corner columnist in January of this year on the problem of breaks in the pre-cast concrete water and sewer pipes used by WSSC. The knowledge he acquired helped educate both citizens and elected and appointed officials alike on a whole host of problems and their possible solutions.

For all his hard work and dedication, however, Mr. Goldstein was not a man without humor. He always wore a hat, indoors or out, and often one themed to the event which he was attending. I remember well one Planning Board session where Wayne strode into the hearing room wearing boots and a white cowboy hat and announced in his testimony that he'd heard a new sheriff was needed in town to clean up the particular mess the Board was confronting that day. The twinkle in his eye and his customary Cheshire cat grin always gave one the impression that he knew some juicy bit of news he couldn't wait to share with you, or that he suspected you knew something which he couldn't wait to hear.

Another remarkable aspect to Wayne was that his ego was never at issue. He volunteered his time and abilities on behalf of the residents of the county without a care for personal gain. But, thankfully, his efforts did receive richly deserved recognition.

Wayne was awarded the 2008 Educational Excellence Award from the Maryland Historical Trust Board of Trustees, for planning the COMSAT charrette as a means of showing the developer/owner that it was possible to profitably redevelop the site while retaining and reusing the historic building on the property, which was designed by world-renowned architect Cesar Pelli. (And, when Wayne felt the success of the effort might be enhanced by Mr. Pelli's attendance, he simply contacted the architect who willingly agreed to travel to the county and participate.) Wayne served as MCCF Vice President from 2004 to 2006 and President from 2006 to 2008, and was awarded the Star Cup last May in recognition of his outstanding service to the Federation and the people of the county. And in a survey conducted by a local political blogger in the fall of last year, respondents voted Wayne one of the "most influential non-elected people in Montgomery County."

Wayne Goldstein was a one-of-a-kind personality and a truly gentle man. And he will be sorely missed.

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 theelms518@earthlink.net