

"Federation Corner" column
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Happy 85th, MCCF!

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

This year marks the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Montgomery County Civic Federation--that's 85 years of citizens volunteering their time and energy in support of the group's mission to preserve and improve the quality of life for all county residents.

The "Guide to the Records of the MCCF," which is housed in the county archives in Rockville, notes that in the early 1920s "thoughtful citizens of the County became alarmed at the gap which was continually widening between local government and its citizens. To close this gap between the citizen and his government, the Civic Association movement gained ground." Neighborhood citizen associations were being formed in older existing communities as well as in many of the county's newly built subdivisions. But these groups were primarily dedicated to improving services in their respective areas.

No single organization, however, sought wholesale changes to the system of county government until the founding of the Civic Federation in 1925. The creation of this new umbrella organization constituted a significant change in the civic movement. Leaders in neighborhood citizen groups could now perform volunteer service on behalf of their communities by serving on the committees of the Federation and contributing to debate in the MCCF delegate assembly on propositions of countywide importance. Major MCCF achievements in the first decade or so of its existence included securing a prohibition on county employees receiving county contracts, and placing the county police force under the Civil Service.

By 1936, civic activists working through the MCCF sought to develop a home rule charter, create a merit system for county employees, and appoint a county comptroller. The next year, a Federation committee was formed to study possible improvements in local government, which resulted in adoption of an MCCF resolution in 1938 calling for county commissioners to fund a third-party study of how to improve county government. In 1939 the commissioners hired the Brookings Institute of Government Research to conduct the study; and in 1941 the study, entitled "Government in Montgomery County," was released.

Throughout much of the 1940s, influenced by President Roosevelt's New Deal politics and an influx of progressive-minded Federal employees, the MCCF began to work toward home rule, urging the replacement of the Board of Commissioners with a county manager and a nonpartisan County Council, establishment of a county employee merit system, and formation of a Civil Service Commission. Although the demand for home rule was opposed by the commissioners, the MCCF created an ad hoc Montgomery County Charter Committee that worked to place a charter referendum on the ballot, which voters approved in 1948.

According to the records in the county archives, throughout much of its history the Federation has been in conflict with the County government because it has "championed such politically unpopular causes as nonpartisan County government, a County Manager system, and the abolition of state-appointed officials to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (i.e.; the County Planning Board) and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission." All of these changes came to pass, in large part through the combined efforts of citizen volunteers working through the Civic Federation.

During the 1950s, the MCCF supported selection of the county school board through nonpartisan elections, and contributed to the revision and improvement in enforcement of zoning codes. As with past changes, these improvements were eventually adopted with an effective push from the civic community. And, right up to the present day, volunteer delegates to the Federation continue to network in order to tackle the problems

of individual communities, urge refinements in local government, and improve the provision of services to county residents.

The MCCF still operates today in the same basic democratic fashion adopted at its founding. Problems or issues are brought to the Federation for consideration either by delegates appointed by neighborhood citizen associations or by any county resident. Issues are then referred to the appropriate MCCF committee for study and recommended action. Committee chairs then present these recommendations to the Executive Committee, which schedules items for consideration by the full delegate assembly at one of ten monthly meetings held each year (we take July and August off). Following adoption of a position by the assembly, MCCF leaders contact government officials to communicate our position and work toward a solution.

In addition to its function as a representative assembly, the Federation also serves as an education forum. An hour or so of each monthly meeting is set aside for a program on a topic of timely importance or general relevance. The programs are an opportunity for county officials to inform attendees about government programs and initiatives, concluding with a question-and-answer period in which all are invited to participate. In addition, the MCCF website--www.montgomerycivic.org--is an information vehicle containing archives of the monthly newsletters, weekly Federation Corner columns, and lists of current issues being monitored by each committee.

MCCF offers the opportunity for residents with varied skills, knowledge and experience to volunteer and make a difference in our county. Check out your Civic Federation. It's 85 and going strong!

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