

"Federation Corner" column
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We may have problems here, but...

by Jim Humphrey
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The Montgomery County government and school system have their problems. But when compared to those that some local governments elsewhere are facing, they might seem tame by comparison. This is not said to downplay the fact that county residents are sometimes harmed by the actions of our officials, or at the least inconvenienced in needing to devote huge amounts of time and energy to achieve adequate relief.

Sure, the current Montgomery County Executive may have forged a less than transparent deal to cancel the lease that an organic farmer and agricultural education program held on a piece of publicly owned land, and turn it over for use by a youth soccer program. And, yes, the farm education program is just the sort of model we should promote as an example of one of our best ideas, and give it full government support rather than treat it so shabbily.

But at least we are not the District of Columbia, where the Mayor reigns under a cloud of suspicion because it is alleged that a politically connected businessman funded a shadow campaign to smear the current Mayor's opponent during the last election.

Okay, maybe the Principal of one of our county's elementary schools with special needs students opened savings accounts in the name of some of the students, and withheld knowledge of those accounts from the parents of the students.

But at least we are not Prince George's County, where the wife of a former politician was caught red-handed by law enforcement officers while trying to stuff her underwear with \$40,000 in bribe money her husband had received, in an attempt to remove this evidence from their home.

Yeah, we might have a growth happy majority of County Council members who, some might say, are foolishly rezoning properties to allow greater volumes of development, when revising the master plans for one community after another. When County Executive Leggett took office seven years ago there was an infrastructure deficit (of schools, road and transit capacity) to support existing development and that deficit still exists today, along with a decades' long maintenance backlog to keep the infrastructure in good condition. All the new Council allowed growth will not help.

But at least we're not China. Due in large part to the shift in youth population from rural to urban areas, cities in China are increasing in population so quickly that this year Beijing experienced vehicle and industry produced smog so thick that drivers on the roads could not see ten feet in front of them. And air quality was so dangerous to human health that retailers were actually selling cans of fresh air to city dwellers.

Also, as a result of the massive amount of infrastructure funding the Chinese central government must allocate to urban areas, rural areas peopled primarily by older citizens are not receiving support in addressing significant problems. As an example, 28 percent of rural villages in China do not have a safe drinking water supply, and more than 16 percent of villages have no waste treatment system of any kind.

Admittedly, every once in a while a public water supply pipe ruptures somewhere in Montgomery County, sometimes shutting down a major artery like Connecticut Avenue to traffic for a week or so.

But in London this week, Thames Water utility workers are trying to dislodge what is being referred to as a "fatberg" clogging the public sewer system. The 15 ton mass is primarily composed of cooking grease and disposable baby diapers.

Regrettably, a dozen or so African American property owners in the Sandy Spring area of Montgomery County have been dispossessed of the use of their properties for the past decade or so, because a Planning Board mistake resulted in removal of the road on which their properties are located from the State tax records map. A seeming conspiracy of dunces has kept them from being able to access their homes by vehicle, or receive their mail in roadside mail boxes. And, by the way, they were still required to pay taxes on their properties for all the years they were denied addresses and could not get Building Permits to renovate or add on to their homes.

Still, we are not Detroit, which has declared bankruptcy. There, so many homes are abandoned on some blocks of the city that the government found it too expensive to maintain services (like street lights and police patrols) for the few remaining residents, and paid them to relocate to more densely populated areas. This summer, approximately 30,000 acres of land within Detroit municipal boundaries, from which abandoned buildings were bulldozed and removed, was used for urban farming.

So, yes, we might have some problems in Montgomery County that are caused or exacerbated by our government officials. Still, with enough pressure applied by residents and the media, we can sometimes convince those officials of the political wisdom of yielding to their constituents' wishes. In some places in the world, people are not so lucky. But that shouldn't stop us from continually trying to improve the state of things in our county.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800 to 1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com