

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Meaningful citizen participation in government**

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Montgomery County has advisory groups, hearings, open houses, online chats, call-in shows, and public meetings galore. A citizen activist (assuming one didn't need to work or see one's family) could attend multiple meetings day after day and night after night, endlessly offering feedback and testimony and still be only catching a fraction of what is going on.

Unfortunately, despite all this activity there is very little actual public participation occurring. That is because most of what occurs is viewed by elected and appointed officials (and their staff) as just a procedural requirement. In other words, the decision makers provide an opportunity for citizens to express their approval or outrage, but most of the time it has nothing to do with the actual decision making process.

Here is how it usually goes. The officials sit up front, trying to look somewhat awake and attentive. The citizens struggle to present (in only 3 minutes) well-researched, nuanced responses to massive staff documents dealing with complex, far-reaching plans and policies. If the citizen manages to hit a sore spot, an official will turn to staff and ask "Is this true? Are we about to make a huge mistake?" Staff reassures them that all is well, the citizen is not allowed a rebuttal, and the dance resumes its familiar steps.

Of course one can always submit detailed written testimony, or organize a grass-roots letter writing campaign. Unfortunately, officials rarely read any of this material. Instead, it is merely reported to them in the form of a score: X total number of emails received, Y in favor, Z against. In other words, while opportunities to participate abound, they are rarely meaningful. So let us take a closer look at what is (and what is not) meaningful participation.

Participation is meaningful when the public's contribution can influence government's decision. It does not matter how useful the input is, if the decision-maker is not open to considering it. Sadly, it seems to me that most officials only respond when what I call "The Frankenstein Threshold" has been crossed. That is, they only respond when there is a mob of villagers with torches and pitchforks beating down the door. (A more subtle variant of this is the "The Oligarchy Threshold", where enough deep-pocketed people express outrage. Unfortunately, the resulting policy change most often simply exempts the posh zip code[s] from the planned action.)

I understand that it is important to know whether ten people or one hundred people wrote in on a given issue, but someone also needs to look at and consider the actual content of the input. A good idea is still a good idea, even when offered by only one citizen. Indeed, research (Dietz and Stern, 2008) has shown that substantive public participation results in better policies.

Participation is meaningful when the public has ready access to the detailed information underpinning the decision. Too often government decisions are based on "black box" calculations, shadowy task forces, or aggregated budget categories. Timing is often a problem as well. Government spends months producing a technical study, draft, plan, or recommendation only to expect citizens to comment in a matter of days. That timeframe is further contracted by requirements to sign up to testify and if representing a citizens' group, to meet with fellow members, deliberate, and come to consensus on a position.

Participation is meaningful when it is both “wide” and “deep”. Government needs to do more than simply provide an input opportunity, it needs to seek out and facilitate the involvement of populations potentially affected by its decisions. While it is important to contact contiguous property owners, the surrounding and “downstream” communities also need to be approached. In these days of electronic communication, there is no excuse for failing to cast a wide public involvement net.

By depth I mean the opportunity to participate over time in collaborative policy-making. Perhaps the best example of this is the Concordia Process for master planning. Using this process, stakeholders (with staff support) were able to develop practical policy alternatives with broad-based support. Another useful approach for smaller-scale projects is the design charrette. These approaches have fallen out of favor for being “too slow and staff-intensive”, but like crafting fine wine, there is no “quick and dirty” way to achieve a great policy product.

So, my 2014 wish for all citizen activists is a year chock full of meaningful participation opportunities. And for decision makers that feel such efforts are too costly and time consuming, remember that meaningful participation is the best insurance against village mobs armed with torches and pitchforks!

*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 the [montgomerycivic@yahoo.com](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*