

“Federation Corner” column

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## **Keeping your eyes open**

By Paula Bienenfeld

There is a somewhat ‘dirty’ joke which was told to me a long time ago by a fellow archaeologist after a long day in the field, and an even longer night drinking beer and tequila. (Archaeologists are like that). I won’t repeat it here. Suffice to say the punch line, ‘I’ll keep an eye out for you,’ is worth repeating here given the events that took place over the last week, and are still continuing.

I refer of course to the infamous bill now making its way through our Delegation in Annapolis, MC24-15, Montgomery Transit. (As I write this, while the bill was pulled from the County Council agenda, it is still on track in Annapolis.)

The bill gives the county a license to ignore our charter, and create an Independent Transit Authority (ITA) to be paid for by taxpayers...the same taxpayers who will have no control over the members, because they won’t be elected. As with WSSC, the members will be appointed. As the bill stands now the County Executive would have the sole authority to appoint five people to this Authority, with no term limits. They would set and raise taxes as they want; take property as they want; set up their own sweet procurement process; and sign contracts as they want.

Our elected Annapolis delegation held a hearing Friday night at 6pm to listen to testimony on the proposed bill. The testimony, including from our civics, was overwhelmingly opposed to the bill and the idea that the Charter would be busted with this bill. The Charter tax limit in place now was set in a public referendum voted on by the citizens of this county. The new bill was largely seen as a way to raise property taxes above the limits that the voters set in a public election. The other authorities that the Authority would have, to establish its own procurement policies and procedures, and to enter into contracts with other governments and private parties, were too much for the good citizens of Montgomery County to stomach.

As each person spoke, limited to two minutes as an individual, or three when representing an organization, these themes were repeated. No to higher property taxes. No to an ‘Authority’ controlling our public employees. No to the secret manner in which this bill was formulated. No to busting the Charter. No to the powers that would be granted to this Authority. No to an unelected small group replacing our democratic process. All these powers need to remain in the hands of our elected representatives.

Others noted that even though the Council would have the ultimate vote on creating this Authority, no one from that body was in attendance. Some residents were surprised at that lack of a council presence, having assumed that for such an important issue there would have been at least one member present. As one woman stated, “I thought the Council was going to be here. If it’s their responsibility, I thought they should be here.”

As has been reported elsewhere Joan Fidler, President of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League, eloquently stated her organization’s opposition to the bill.

So many civics and individuals came out to oppose the bill that the hearing lasted well into the night. Many thanks to our Civic Fed members and all the civics: the Twinbrook Citizens Association; Seven Oaks Evanswood Citizens Association; Cherrywood Homeowners Association; Greater Four Corners Alliance; Maplewood Citizens Association; Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Association; Locust Hill Citizens' Association; and of course the Greater Olney Civic Association, for turning out and speaking forcefully in opposition to the idea of a bill that would overturn our Charter and take authority from the people and our elected officials and put it in the hands of a few unelected and unaccountable insiders.

One note, one of the documents we reviewed was the VHB/PFM Group/McKennon Shelton & Henn, LLP study on the Transit Authority. The original date on the document which was posted was January 2014. We have been told by the County Executive's staff that the 2014 date is a typo that has since been corrected, and that the correct date is January 2015, and have been asked to let people know of that correction. We are happy to let people know the revised date. (Full disclosure: we asked for some backup to verify the report date, but haven't yet received any.) However, we wonder what the kind of oversight the Authority itself will have if the county government doesn't even notice the date on the cover of its report is wrong before the report is made public.

The story goes that when the Constitutional Convention of 1787 had ended, a woman, Ms. Powel, walked up to Benjamin Franklin and asked him, "Well, Dr. Franklin, what have we got? A Republic? Or a Monarchy?" His response was, "A Republic – if you can keep it."

Can we keep it?

To my fellow civic activists, keep an eye out.