

THE COUNTY CIVIC FEDERATION A DYNAMIC ORGANIZATION

by Sherman Pratt

Arlington County is a unique community insofar as active and effective organizations, groups, committees, and individuals who contribute to civic affairs are concerned. The Arlington County nongovernmental organization that has probably had the greatest influence on county affairs, in widely varying degrees from time to time, over the longest period, has been the Arlington County Civic Federation. The Federation membership in recent years has consisted mainly of some forty to fifty neighborhood civic associations.

The Federation's membership, however, has also included over the years many additional community organizations and activities. These include at this writing the following:

- The League of Women Voters;
- The American Association of University Women;
- The Arlington Education Association;
- The Arlington Heritage Alliance;
- The Arlington Historical Society;
- The Arlington Taxpayers Association;
- Delta Kappa Gamma;
- The Arlington Jay Cees;
- Friends of Arlington Parks; and
- The Pro-Bolivian Committee.

From time to time, when a controversial or exceptionally important issue arose, certain ad hoc groups have also been members of the Federation for short or temporary periods.

The origins of the Federation, based on its records and available sketchy information in the Virginia Room of the Arlington County Main Library, seem to date from the year 1916. At that time, six local civic associations in Arlington, then still known as the "county part of Alexandria County," joined forces in what was to become known as the Arlington County Civic Federation of today.¹ The concern of the groups then was primarily roads and schools, both of which the groups wanted improved.

One of the first actions of the new Federation was to attempt to prod the Alexandria County Supervisors into action on a number of matters of concern. Records in the Arlington Library's Virginia Room indicate that the following letter was sent to the supervisors on March 14, 1916:

At the last meeting of the Civic Federation an extensive discussion was had of the various improvements which are urgently needed in the County viz; good roads, a larger school building, a water supply system and a sewage disposal system.

We hope for improvements; or any future solution, except by bond issue.

We come to urge you to determine the cost.

We suggest the State Highway Commission send an engineer to estimate the cost of road and State building necessary....

We believe a splendid future lies before this county. You have an opportunity to do great constructive work.

G. S. Lockett, Sec.

A brief description of the Federation history and functioning appears in the 1967 issue of its constitution and by-laws, and includes the following:

One of the Federation's greatest contributions to the county has been to serve as a sounding board for all citizens on matters of civic interest. Its delegates represent the grass roots opinions of the ordinary citizens, regardless of political or partisan affiliation, on civic matters, and thus it may be truly said that the Federation is the Voice of Arlington.

As stated, the influence of the Federation seems to have varied considerably over the years. At certain times the prestige of the Federation reached high levels and a cursory review of the newspapers in some years reveals that seldom was there an issue without a lead page one story reflecting the influence and energy of Federation actions. For example the Alexandria Gazette on November 6, 1929, carried a story on page one:

Arlington County Civic Federation
Passes Resolution at Last Night's Meeting.
Many At Meeting

The following letter addressed to Mr Edward Duncan, chairman of the Arlington County Board of Supervisors, was adopted last evening unanimously at the regular monthly meeting of the Arlington County Civic Federation with a goodly number in attendance and was signed by the various delegates there....

Other prominent page one lead story press coverage of the Federation's actions selected at random and considered typical of the period include:

CIVIC FEDERATION FAVORS ELECTION OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS — *Arlington Chronicle*, June 9, 1944.

FEDERATION TOLD COUNTY MUST HAVE INCINERATOR NOW — *The Arlington Sun*, January 5, 1945.

FEDERATION SEEKS TO COORDINATE WAR MEMORIAL PLANS — *The Sun*, February 9, 1945.

FEDERATION FAILS TO ACT ON PROPOSAL TO BOOST REVENUE — *The Sun*, March 9, 1945.

CIVIC FEDERATION VOTES 29 to 10 AGAINST [TAX] INCREASE — *The Sun*, April 6, 1945.

FEDERATION OFFERS 3 FOR SCHOOL BOARD — *The Sun*, May 4, 1945.

FEDERATION URGES CONTRACT SYSTEM FOR DOG POUND — *The Sun*, June 8, 1945.

FEDERATION ASKS BOARD MEMBERS BE ELECTED AT ONE TIME — *The Sun*, October 5, 1945.

FEDERATION ASKS SPEEDIER PURCHASE OF PLAYGROUNDS — *The Sun*, November 16, 1945.

FEDERATION ASKS GAS RATE PROBE — *The Sun*, September 13, 1946.

A study of the records of the press for extended periods before and after the above cited articles reveal that the omission of mention of the Federation's actions and positions following Federation monthly meetings was the exception rather than the rule. The Federation seems to have almost always gotten prompt attention and on page one in one of the lead stories of an issue.

In more recent years the contrary seems to have been the practice. When this writer was active in the Federation in the 1960s and early 1970s as chairman of the Legislative and Local Government and Executive Committees, and as president, and in the years thereafter to date, publicity for the Federation was almost non-existent.

With or without media coverage, however, the influence of the Federation when before the County Board remains steady. It is probably quite safe to say that there is no other organization in the county that enjoys at this writing the significant influence as does the County Civic Federation, although many of its positions are adopted only after considerable push and pull to resolve conflicting positions of its delegates.

Federation Functioning

Pursuant to its constitution the Federation meets monthly, except during July and August, unless the president calls a special meeting. For many years it met in the Dawson Terrace Recreation Center on North Taft Street, and in the Lyon Park Community Center, but more recently in the Hazel Convention Center of the Arlington Hospital on North George Mason Drive.

Each member association or group is authorized to designate four delegates, and four alternates, any four of which may attend Federation meetings, each with one vote. Ordinarily only one or two delegates from each member association or group attend Federation meetings. Membership dues were \$20 per

annum until 1985, at which time they were increased to \$30.

Once a year the Federation holds its annual banquet in various locations in the county. In 1995 the banquet was held in the top floor dining hall of the Sheraton National Hotel on Columbia Pike. That dining hall presents a breathtaking panoramic view of the capital area. At the banquet, the delegate or committee that has made "the greatest contribution to civic endeavor in Arlington during the year" is presented with a trophy, known as the Evening Star Award until the late 1970s when that newspaper ceased publishing. Since then the Journal Newspapers have presented the award. Additionally, from 1936 to date of this writing, certain notable individuals have been designated as "Members of the Order of Distinguished and Meritorious Service."²

The bulk of the Federation's activities center around the work of its various standing committees and their reports to the assembled Federation for its consideration and action, if any. Delegates are appointed to the committees based on their interests or backgrounds and committee chairmen are appointed by the Federation president, usually with help from the Executive Committee, following the annual election of officers.

For many years there were fourteen standing committees in the Federation but in 1985 they were reduced to eleven, to wit; Membership, Constitution and By-Laws, Public Services, Legislation, Transportation, Planning and Zoning, Conservation and Beautification, Schools, Revenue and Expenditures, Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs, and Housing.

The busiest committees on a continuing basis have probably been the Zoning and Schools Committees since they consider matters, proposals, or problems that are regularly considered by the appropriate county authorities throughout the year. The Revenues and Expenditures Committee is most busy during County or School Board budget consideration times each year. The work of other committees is concentrated at times when a matter arises that is within their area of interest or concern.

In early 1993 the Federation published an index of the subjects that had been considered and acted upon for the period 1986 to 1993. In addition to the usual and routine matters such as the county budgets, schools, legislation, parks, land use, or public safety, the index reflected that the Federation had also considered many diverse matters to include the following:

- Preservation of the Abingdon Plantation ruins at National Airport.
- Proposals for county actions to cope with the AIDS problems.
- Actions with respect to creating affordable housing.
- Operation of the Airport Authority (National and Dulles).
- County actions concerning Chesapeake Bay preservation.
- Establishment of detoxification centers.

- Elderly care centers.
- Proposals concerning the establishment of Family Life Programs.
- Shelters for the homeless.
- A proposed urban forestry program.

Positions of the Federation on a particular issue or matter are usually reported by the committee chairman, or other Federation leadership, to the decision making bodies of the county at the next regular meeting. These include the County Board, the School Board, the Planning Commission, and sometimes, the Board of Zoning Appeals. Contacts are also often made with the county manager's staff.

The Federation constitution provides that there shall be a President, Vice President, and Treasurer, elected at the annual June meeting and a Secretary chosen by the Executive Committee. Although the constitution does not specify how many terms an officer may serve, the well established custom has been for presidents to serve no more than two terms.

Civic Association Membership

The names of the neighborhood associations that comprise the membership of the Federation usually indicate the geographical part of Arlington County that is represented by a particular association, such as Claremont, Donaldson Run, Lyon Village, Nauck, Arlington Ridge, East Falls Church, Columbia Pike, Central Arlington, Glencarlyn, or Washington-Lee.³

Since each association determines its own boundaries not every part of the county is necessarily represented by a civic association, although most citizens of the county will reside within the boundaries of one or more associations.

The resolution of disputes by associations as to their boundaries are attempted by the Membership Committee, but not always successfully. There have been instances when two adjoining associations claimed the same street or block in which case a resident could claim membership in either or both of the associations. Most associations endeavor to build their membership to the maximum and are loath to deny membership to anyone residing within their claimed boundaries even if they overlap with those of another association.

Citizen interest in civic associations has often been determined by events that are perceived to affect the population, and particularly themselves, for better or worse. There is no legal requirement or law that there be a civic association, or that citizens join and pay dues to an association. Most associations can claim only a fraction of the residents within their boundaries as dues-paying members, and usually no more than a dozen or two members or guests attend monthly, or periodic, association meetings.

For these reasons, among others, spokespersons for associations are sometimes looked upon by county officials with some cynicism or doubt. This writer remembers on more than one occasion appearing before the County Board to report on a position taken by the Arlington Ridge Civic Association on a matter in controversy only to have a board member peer inquisitorially and ask, "How many of your members were present when that position was taken, and how many voted for or against the position?"

Neighborhood associations have been known to spring into existence, or fade away into inactive status from time to time, depending on the emergence, or resolution, of some particular problem or controversy over which the citizenry becomes concerned. These matters could include the proposed construction or enlargement of a road or highway such as Interstate I-395, I-595, or I-66, or a major development such as Pentagon City, or the location of a county operated facility such a detoxification center, fire station, post office, or sewage treatment plant, or any other proposal that is believed to impact, adversely or not, on a locality in particular, or the county generally.

For many years the Federation sponsored an annual "Federation Recognition Day" during which the goal was to more widely promote the purposes and activities of the organization so that wider participation could be generated. To achieve better press coverage the Executive Committee of the Federation some years back asked this writer to prepare an article for the media describing the Federation and its work. This was done and the article appeared in all the Northern Virginia newspapers. It was published in the Northern Virginia Sun on March 4, 1975. The item highlighted the history, operations, functions, and purposes of the Federation, and stressed the importance of the role that it plays in the community.

Some Author Recommendations

For all the weaknesses of the voluntary and unofficial neighborhood civic associations as a barometer of public sentiment, there seems to be no more reliable gauge of the collective local public will in the neighborhoods of Arlington County than the Civic Federation's member associations — other than, perhaps, the official ballot box in the duly conducted official elections. This seems especially true since the governing County Board members are elected at-large by county wide voting without any requirement that they reside in any particular, or "local" part of the county.

Under the at-large voting arrangement each board member is said to represent all of the county and not any smaller part exclusively. However, for most of the past thirty years all five members of the board have been from the northern half, or even northernmost third or less, of the county. So long as

Board members are elected at-large, the neighborhood civic associations provide the only real and most correctly attuned and effective local voices before county decision making bodies for any parts of the county in which a board member does not reside. This situation has greatly increased the value of the Federation as a forum for those sections of the county.

Notes and References

Sherman Pratt has been an Arlington resident since his retirement from the Army in the early 1960s. He is the immediate past president of the Historical Society and a past contributor to the Society Magazine. He is a veteran of World War II and the Korean War and has written books on both wars.

¹ Arlington historian Bruce McCoy records that the County's first neighborhood citizens association of record was the Cherrydale Citizens Association, dating from 1900; followed by the Ft. Myer Heights, Ballston, Clarendon and Parkway Associations in 1912, 1913 and 1914, respectively.

² Lists of the Trophy and Distinguished Service awardees are contained in the Archives of the Virginia Room in the Arlington Central Library, or in Federation records.

³ A list of the Federation membership is available from the Federation Secretary, or from the County Board Clerk.