

## **The Mayor's Den**

By Walter J. Behr

### **'DIFFERENT' RIVER ROAD MEDIAN TO BE ELIMINATED**

Many thanks to the two dozen residents who wrote the County Hearing Examiner protesting three planned changes near the intersection of River Road and Little Falls Parkway. Following publication of last month's *Town Journal*, I had several conversations with Ron Welke, Transportation Coordinator at the Montgomery County Planning Board, and am able to clarify the location and extent of the proposed modifications, as follows:

#### **1. Remove River Road Median**

Good news for those who turn left out of, and into, Greystone Street at River Road! The median that the Friendship Heights Sector Plan pinpoints for removal is not the painted median on River Road, on either side of Greystone. Rather, it is the concrete median on River at the Little Falls intersection. Removing the narrow median and shrinking the River Road lane width from 12 feet to 10\_ feet will permit addition of another lane for traffic on River Road heading toward Potomac without widening River Road.

The importance of this clarification for those who use the Greystone entrance is, first, the extra lane will extend back from Little Falls only about halfway to Greystone. Second, the painted two-part median on River which makes it possible to turn left out of Greystone (toward DC) and left into Greystone (from Potomac or Westbard) will not be modified.

I sincerely regret the false alarm in last month's *Town Journal*, but, unfortunately, the Sector Plan description of the planned alteration is very brief and subject to misunderstanding. Here it is (page 91):

***Modify the intersection of River Road and Little Falls Parkway...Remove the narrow median on the southeastern leg of River Road and provide an additional through lane on River Road's northwest-bound approach (i.e., toward Westbard). The narrow median exists only to reinforce the separation between the southeast-bound and northwest-bound flows; it is not a pedestrian refuge, and there is no crosswalk on its side of River Road.***

No mention is made of narrowing the lanes, which led me to believe that the extra lane would be created by eliminating the double painted median on River Road, on either side of Greystone.

## **2. Extend Right-Turn Lane on River at Parkway**

The proposal to extend the right-turn lane onto Little Falls Parkway for River Road traffic heading toward Westbard and Potomac is not mentioned in the Friendship Heights Sector Plan. Rather, it is a recommendation of the Planning Board in its Project Plan Review Opinion on the Chevy Chase Center. The recommendation will not become final unless/until it is included in Subdivision and Site Plans and the plans are approved by the Planning Board.

The opinion (on page 20) provides for:

*Adding additional right-turn lanes within the existing right-of-way on northbound and southbound River Road at Little Falls Parkway at the time of issuance of the initial occupancy permit for any of the development.*

As in the plan for an extra through lane on River Road, there is no sketch, diagram or specification of the proposed right-turn lane in the Planning Board Opinion to indicate how long it would be. Ron Welke, the Transportation Coordinator at the Planning Board, says that it will extend no more than halfway back to Greystone. Last week, he sent us sketches of existing and proposed lanes, but the drawings do not show Greystone or the length of new lanes. (The drawings are too large to reproduce here, but may be examined at the Town Hall.)

## **3. Widen Little Falls Parkway**

The second recommendation of concern in the Planning Board's Opinion on the Chevy Chase Center (also on page 20) provides for:

*a traffic study [after development gets underway] to determine the need for improvements to Little Falls Parkway, specifically, to widen Little Falls Parkway at the intersection by one lane on the south [Somerset] side within the existing right-of-way to accommodate left turn lanes on both approaches to River Road...*

In other words, if it becomes necessary to widen Little Falls Parkway for an extra left turn onto River for traffic from Bethesda, the new pavement would be on the Somerset side rather than on the side where the new lane would be added.

Ron Welke's explanation is that it appears that the right-of-way would be more easily converted to roadway on the Somerset side than the other side. He estimates that æ if and when needed æ the new pavement would extend about 500 feet on either side of River.

## **Planning Board Chairman Notified of Our Concerns**

At Welke's suggestion, I have written William H. Hussman, Planning Board Chairman, alerting him of our concerns, pointing out the irony of the Park and Planning Commission suggesting **reduction** of parkland (for the extended right-turn lane on River and a new lane on the Parkway) and pointing out the need for specifications. Copies of the letter are available from Tom at the Town Hall.

We will, of course, notify residents and testify when the Planning Board holds hearings on Subdivision and Site Plans for the Chevy Chase Center.

Meanwhile, we are awaiting the report of Hearing Examiner Philip Tierney to the County Council on the proposed rezoning of the Chevy Chase Center parking lot. He may or may not mention testimony and letters expressing concern about the probable effect of the proposed development on traffic and about changes at and near the River Road/Little Falls Parkway intersection recommended by the Planning Board.

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## **WANTED: TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT DISTRICT REP**

Legislation establishing a transportation management district (TMD) for the Friendship Heights area has been passed by the County Council. The law provides for an advisory committee and designates a spot on the committee for a representative from Somerset. If you are interested in the position, please call the Town Hall (301-657-3211) or me (301-654-1258) by **Sunday, January 2**.

The principal objective of the TMD is to increase the number of employees who do not drive to work from the existing 34 percent to 39 percent. In the words of the Friendship Heights Sector Plan, "Efforts will be made to increase transportation choices, enhance accessibility to the Friendship Heights Metro station and mitigate the impact of traffic from existing and new development through effective management of transportation assets and the provision of new transportation services."

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## **BRIDGE IMPROVEMENTS REAL VALUE**

If you use the pedestrian trail from the Town swimming pool bathhouse to Friendship Heights, you have seen something new at the bridge over Little Falls Branch æ stone wing walls, which were added for safety reasons, but which surely make the bridge more attractive.

The contractor was Four Seasons Landscaping of Rockville, and they did a splendid job. Their bid for the new structures and some repairs was \$4,495, which was **half** of the next closest (of

five) bids. If we had not seen their recent work at two houses in Somerset, we would have been skeptical of the low bid.

When you have a very favorable experience with a contractor, do your neighbors æ and the contractor æ a favor by telling Tom Carter, who will add the name to his files. And if you are looking for help, Tom will be glad to retrieve names from the files.

Conversely, if you have a bad experience with a contractor, add that information to the Town files, too, so that other residents can avoid similar disappointment. I also recommend, for the benefit of the wider public, that serious problems with contractors be reported to the County Office of Consumer Affairs (240-777-3636) and the Better Business Bureau (202-393-8000).

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## **STREET REPAIRS ANOTHER GOOD DEAL**

Good fortune also befell us when our streets were repaired recently. Bids were on a unit basis (per ton of asphalt), and the low bid was \$60 a ton, compared with the next lowest bid of \$130 a ton.

Again, the tremendous difference would have made us leery had not the low bid come from a company that had done a number of jobs in Somerset, the most recent being replacement of damaged curb and sidewalk sections. The contractor is NZI of Beltsville.

Total cost of the project æ including the fee paid to our inspector æ was \$21,207. The Town Council had authorized \$40,000 for the job.

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## **FELIX VASQUEZ JOINS MAINTENANCE STAFF**

Congratulations to Felix Vasquez for being named Somerset's newest employee by the Town Council on December 6. As an independent contractor since last March, Felix proved himself to be a knowledgeable, dependable, hard worker. He is the fourth member of our maintenance staff, joining Gardener/Horticulturist Jonathan Dawkins, Larry Owens and Mario Green.

Father of four, Felix immigrated from Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic to Silver Spring at the behest of his sister, Inez, who has been a housekeeper in Somerset for 20 years. He is studying English two nights a week in a Montgomery County public school and also preparing to take his driver's license test. His hobbies are dominoes and music.

If you see a tall, strong, happy man working in a town park or street, it may be Felix. Try greeting him, and I'm sure you'll receive a big smile in return.

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## **HOUSE NUMBERS NEED TO BE SEEN**

Have you checked your house numbers lately, that is, from the street?

Recently, while inventorying street signs which needed replacement, I was unable to find the number of the house behind a particular sign æ on the house, in the yard or on the curb. (Apparently the owners had opted not to have the number painted on the curb.) I was able to list the address only by locating the one next door, then adding, or subtracting, two.

After this routine, I decided to go to the door and suggest that the occupants æ for their safety and the convenience of guests æ correct the problem. It turned out that large house numbers were in place next to the front door, but were hidden from the street by shrubbery that had grown over the years.

Here are the guidelines to follow and, incidentally, comply with the County Zoning Ordinance. House numbers should be:

- At least five inches high and readable from the street;
- Set on a background of contrasting color;
- Plain, block Arabic numerals;
- On a sign attached to a tree, fence, gate or lawn stake if the view of the house is blocked by trees or shrubs.

It would be wise to follow these standards even if your numbers have been painted on the curb. After all, it is the time of year when snow could obliterate them.

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## **POOL MEMBERSHIP UP SHARPLY**

Somerset swimming pool membership reached a record-high 341 households last summer, as shown on the annual pool financial report, which appears on page 5 of this *Town Journal*. Undoubtedly one reason for the new high was the elimination of the nominal \$20 annual fee in effect the previous year, when 300 families joined. (There are 411 houses in Somerset, four of which include accessory apartments, resulting in a total of 415 authorized housing units, or households.)

Income was \$12,000, exclusively from guest fees, compared with operating expenses of \$81,000, capital improvements of \$42,000, or total disbursements of \$123,000. The \$111,000 net loss was paid, of course, from our General Fund.

Major capital expenses for the year were for repairing plumbing and tiling women's showers, fashioning the picnic area, replacing the heater for shower water and most of the pool furniture, and building stone wing walls at the bridge.

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## ***NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS***

*On behalf of the Town Council and staff, I extend best wishes for a healthy, harmonious and generally happy New Year.*

*Remember, we are here to serve you in ways that only the government closest to the people can. If you have a problem, request or question, no matter how serious or trivial, give us a call and we'll do our best to help. When Tom is not available at Town Hall, please feel free to call me. Even though the office answering machine says to call me in case of emergency, I invite you to interpret that as liberally as you choose.*

*Have a good year!*

## **Town Hall Tidbits**

By Tom Carter

HOLIDAY GREETINGS from the staff at Town Hall æ Tom Carter, Corrie Morsey, Larry Owens, Jonathan Dawkins, Mario Green and Felix Vasquez.

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## **HOLIDAY TRASH PICKUP**

There will be no change to the usual trash pickups on Tuesdays and Fridays during the holidays.

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## **CHRISTMAS TREE DISPOSAL**

Christmas trees will be picked up by J&J on **Tuesday, January 11**. The is the **only** day for pickups this year. J&J will make only one pass through Town that day, so be sure to have your

tree at the curb no later than 7:00 a.m. Trees must be free of tinsel, lights and ornaments, removed from any bases or stands, and not in plastic bags.

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## LEAF SEASON ENDS

A big thanks to everyone for bearing with us during the past month. We have experienced unbelievably bad luck with our machines this fall. The big leaf vacuum went down on November 15 after it caught fire. The next day the small backup vacuum failed shortly after starting and required two days to get the parts to fix it. It broke down twice thereafter, on November 22 and December 3, both times with a broken impeller. We contracted Rolling Acres Landscape/Nursery, our snow removal service, to assist the day after Thanksgiving. This helped immensely in catching up, since the small machine only handles about half the amount of the big one and is not designed to work as we have been forced to use it.

Please help us by not putting rocks, bricks and branches in with your leaves. These are what broke the impellers on the small machine both times.

The collection season ends on **December 30**. The way to get rid of any remaining leaves is to put them in your mulch pile or at the curb on Tuesdays in **paper** bags or reusable containers.

**In consideration of your neighbors æ especially during the holiday season æ please do not take any recyclables or refuse to the curb until the evening before the collection.**

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## LAST CHANCE FOR CALENDARS

Year 2000 League of Women Voters calendars are still available at the Town Hall for \$5, or call Betty Palmer at 301-654-1115.

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## ODD JOB HELPERS

The following residents have asked to be listed to do **odd jobs** for other residents at a price to be negotiated between them [general chores (G), baby-sitting (B), pet care/walking (P)].

Alex Baldinger (P), 301-657-4613 Adam & Daniel Heller (G), 301-654-5497 Patrick McGhee (G), 301-986-0880

5533 Warwick Place 4803 Falstone Avenue 5407 Surrey Street

Michael Finkelstein (GP), 301-654-0322 David Marx (GBP), 301-951-9593 Ian Quine (G), 301-654-2146 (school

5527 Surrey Street 5402 Trent Street vacations only) 5919 Cumberland Avenue

Cate Helfgott (GBP), 301-657-3010 Michael & Patrick McGarrah, 301-652-7385 Katie Steller (B), 301-718-7382

5513 Uppingham Street 4608 Dorset Avenue 5407 Greystone Street

## **Legislation**

At the December 6 meeting, the Town Council introduced legislation to amend the Town Code to increase the penalty for violation of the Building Code from \$100 to \$1,000.

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## **Council Actions**

At the December 6 meeting, the Council took the following actions:

1. Heard a report by the Town Audit Committee on the FY99 annual audit. Appointed Councilmember Judy Frankel to the Audit Committee and Councilmember Peter Gubser as alternate. Approved the committee's recommendation to have the monthly bank statement sent to Judy Frankel.
2. Approved a building permit for Anton Hajjar and Sandra Hughes, 4521 Cumberland Avenue, to add a screened porch to the rear of their house.
3. Approved a one-year extension of the building permit issued to Bill McPherrin and Keith Robinson, 4812 Essex Avenue, for an addition to the rear of their house.
4. Confirmed the Mayor's reappointment of Tracy Truman to the Board of Supervisors of Elections for a three-year term.
5. Approved the purchase of two new lamps for the Greystone entrance for \$1,065.70 from Industrial Lighting Group.
6. Set tennis fees for calendar year 2000 at \$5 per household.
7. Set dates for nominations of Mayor and two Councilmembers for two-year terms on Monday, March 6, and for elections on Monday, April 3, 2000.



8. Extended the pool management contract of Bethesda Aquatics for the 2000 swimming season at a cost of \$52,500.

9. Accepted the proposal by consultant Steve Richter for a three-block pilot study of undergrounding overhead wires, including a cost estimate and "ballpark" approximation for all of Somerset. Maximum cost of the study will be \$7,500.

10. Took no action on a proposal to support Congressional bills which would require that a portion of royalties from oil and gas wells in Federal offshore waters be used for conservation projects such as urban parks and recreation, nature centers, trails and protection of wildlife. Our Senators and Representative already support the issue.

11. Approved the transfer of Felix Vasquez, laborer, from contract to employee status at the present hourly rate of \$10.50, but with fringe benefits, effective January 1, 2000.

12. Approved the use of the Town Hall by resident Joan Weiss at no cost for a free concert and display open to the public. The display will document the history of a post-Civil War black community near Poolesville.

## **Tennis Talk**

### **RUBLES OR DOLLARS - YOUR CHOICE**

Would you like to become Y2K compliant for the Somerset tennis courts? Well, it will cost you 13,435 rubles! But don't be alarmed; if you prefer, you may pay in dollars æ \$5 to be exact, with a check payable to "Town of Somerset" and mailed or delivered to Tom Carter at the Town Hall. This will cover all players in your household for the entire first year of the new millennium.

Beginning on New Year's Day æ if you are up and about and playing æ please be sure to display your ID card for 2000 while on the court. Your 1999 card will become history at midnight December 31.

### **TRAFFIC COMMITTEE WILL MEET JAN. 20**

The Traffic Committee will hold its next meeting on Thursday, January 20, at 7:30 p.m. in the Town Hall conference room, according to Chairman Richard Furcolo. Nonmembers are welcome.

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# Town Web Site

## **HELP MAKE IT LIVELY, INTERACTIVE, RESPONSIVE**

By Gayley Knight  
Town Web Administrator

A small but dedicated group of residents has begun the exciting challenge of making the Town web site a lively, interactive and responsive vehicle for Town residents. You may access the site at **<http://www.townofsomerset.com>**.

In addition to the resources currently available on the site, we are adding a traffic issues page, courtesy of Gabriel Roth; resources for elder care; Town traditions; and, most important, a link to any Town resident's business or personal page.

Fill out the form below and turn it in to the Town Hall, or e-mail the information to **[clerk@townofsomerset.com](mailto:clerk@townofsomerset.com)**, and we will put a link on the Town site for you. And don't forget æ if you have an interest that you would like to see on the site, let us know.

Currently, the Web Site Committee is comprised of Gail Werner, Mark Greenberg, Bonnie Lewin, Gabriel Roth and myself, but it's not too late to join. Please call me at 301-656-7388 if you are interested.

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## Special Rates for Seniors

### **METRO WILL REQUIRE NEW ID CARDS**

Beginning January 1, Metro will begin using a new copper-colored ID card for seniors 65 and over and will not longer honor green cards. Applications for the new IDs are available at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center, plaza floor, 4805 Edgemoor Lane, Bethesda (301-986-4325). Be sure to bring proof of age. Metro will mail you a new card.

With your ID card, you may buy fare cards that entitle you to half of regular rush hour fare on Metrorail and 50 cents per trip on buses. Fare cards may be purchased at the B-CC Center or at supermarkets.

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# **County Matters**

## **NEW LAW WILL HELP RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS**

Special exceptions will be harder to obtain and retain as a result of passage by the County Council of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance introduced by the Councilmember from our district, Betty Ann Krahnke. Applicants for such operations as offices, private schools and retirement and nursing homes in residential areas now have a higher burden of proof that their use will be compatible with the surrounding community. Conforming to an area's master plan is now emphasized.

Also, when the property changes hands, the amendment allows any "aggrieved person" who has "substantial evidence" to seek new limits on a special exception or even have it revoked.

The Town Council supported the zoning text amendment and we communicated our position to the County Council. The amendment was bitterly opposed by developers and others. It squeezed through on a 5-to-4 vote. We sent letters of appreciation to Betty Ann and the other four Councilmembers who voted for the amendment.

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## **SERVE AS ELECTION JUDGE**

Are you looking for a rewarding way to get involved in the election process on which our nation is built? The Montgomery County Board of Elections suggests that you serve as an election judge, working at the polls on primary and general election days, Tuesday, March 7, and Tuesday, November 7.

Most election judges work at polling places, normally their own æ in our case Somerset Elementary School. Duties include:

- Arriving at the polling place by 6 a.m. and remaining until 9 p.m.;
- Setting up voting booths, tables and signs;
- Checking voters' names, instructing on use of voting machines and processing ballots;
- Maintaining the security of voting materials.

Attendance at a two-hour training session is required. Although a small stipend is paid for each election served, the real satisfaction comes from performing a vital service to the county, state and nation.

For more information, Democrats should call 240-777-8570, Republicans, 240-777-8575. Anyone may inquire by e-mail at: elections@co.mo.md.us.

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## **REVIEW PAY OF BOARDS, COMMISSIONS**

The County Council is seeking applicants for an advisory task force to study the compensation of certain boards and commissions. Letters expressing an interest in serving, including a resume, must be received by the County Council in Rockville by Wednesday, January 5. Work of the task force is expected to be completed by next April.

Questions regarding the task force may be directed to Council staff member Justina Ferber at 240-777-7938.

## **Cable TV**

### **NEW OWNER LIKELY**

Cable TV Montgomery will, in all probability, have a new owner in the near future. Comcast, the nation's fourth largest cable TV and multimedia company, has notified the County and the municipalities that it hopes to take over from Prime Communications early next year.

The Montgomery County municipalities, through the County chapter of the Maryland Municipal League, voted to hire Attorney David Podolsky to negotiate a contract for us, as he did with Prime and Starpower. He hopes to be able to include a provision requiring Comcast to pay his fees. Councilmember Anne Proctor has agreed to serve on the committee which will advise Podolsky. The County, which is negotiating simultaneously, wants Comcast to agree to speed the upgrade of the system and to improve customer service.

# Retirees Invited

## **AMERICAN U. OFFERS FREE LECTURES**

Retirees have a wide choice of new topics in a free January lecture series sponsored by the Institute for Learning (ILR), a non-denominational and non-sectarian affiliate of American University.

The January lectures, scheduled from 10 a.m. to noon every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during the month, are held in the educational wing of the Temple Baptist Church, 3820 Nebraska Avenue, NW. The opening session on Tuesday, January 4, will feature retired Foreign Service officer Sol Shindler speaking on Kosovo.

All are welcome. There is no fee for the lectures and no reservations are required. Interested persons should telephone the ILR office for a copy of the lecture schedule at 202-885-3920.

# Health Care

## **GUARANTEED FOR ALL MARYLAND CITIZENS?**

A nonprofit corporation called Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative Education Fund is working to educate the public about the need for universal health care in Maryland. Discussion of their "Declaration of Health Care Independence" is scheduled for the January 3 Town Council meeting at 8:55 p.m. Friendship Heights Village Council supports the Declaration and has requested that we follow suit. The Declaration follows:

### **DECLARATION OF HEALTH CARE INDEPENDENCE:**

#### ***HEALTH CARE FOR ALL***

WHEREAS: Over 835,000 Marylanders, including over 100,000 children, have no health insurance and equal numbers of Marylanders have inadequate health coverage; and

WHEREAS: Most Marylanders without health insurance are workers and their families, and the number of the working uninsured is expected to increase significantly over the next decade; and

WHEREAS: The present health care insurance system is increasingly bureaucratic and wastefully expensive, with a significant proportion of our health care dollars going to insurance company profits and to corporate overhead and administrative costs, including high salaries, lobbying expenses, marketing, and multiple and needlessly complex claims processing procedures; and

WHEREAS: With the projection of double-digit annual percent increases in health premiums, managed care has not proven itself to be the cure for escalating health costs; and

WHEREAS: Marylanders strongly support significant change in the health care system; and

WHEREAS: Narrowly targeted reforms would not fundamentally change a structurally-flawed system; therefore

BE IT RESOLVED: That the undersigned organization joins the Maryland Citizens' health Initiative Education Fund in endorsing a comprehensive health care system which would guarantee quality health care for all Marylanders. This system, *Health Care For All*, would be administered by and financed through an independent agency governed by health professionals and consumers, and will guarantee for all Marylanders:

- Access to affordable, quality health care without regard to income, employment, or health status.
- Freedom to choose their doctors and other health professionals.
- A comprehensive, age-specific, quality health benefits package.
- Providers who practice according to professional standards, without undue interference from third party decision-makers.

The new system will achieve overall cost savings by streamlining health care financing, improving efficiency, expanding preventive care, and reducing overhead and unnecessary insurance company profits.

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