

"Federation Corner" column
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County Council risks its credibility with refusal to evaluate COMSAT building

by Wayne Goldstein

The reputation of Montgomery County government has been on trial in the court of public opinion for almost a year since the explosive hearing last July 7 at the Planning Board on the Clarksburg Town Center, now known to everyone simply as "Clarksburg." The Planning Board and various Executive branch agencies have been heavily criticized and have made extensive efforts to fix the problems while trying to prevent recurrences. The County Council has also worked to figure out what went wrong while writing and passing relevant new legislation.

Civic activists have seen changes which have produced greater openness, although we are troubled by actions that so contradict the spirit of reform as to seem worse than what was the norm a year ago. We are vigilant about enforcement of laws related to site plans, zoning, affordable housing, forest conservation, and sediment control. However, these concerns have been compounded due to the inexplicable and indefensible government actions concerning the historic designation process for the COMSAT Laboratories Building in Clarksburg.

The facts are overwhelming that this is one of only a few buildings in Montgomery County that has national and international importance because of what happened inside of the building. For the impact on national and world culture, the COMSAT Building is the equal to the Silver Spring house where Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* and the North Bethesda cabin where Josiah Henson overcame slavery as the real-life Uncle Tom. What Rachel Carson is to the modern environmental movement and Josiah Henson is to the struggle to overcome slavery and to gain true civil rights, the COMSAT Building is to the development of satellite communication technology that allows for the instantaneous transmission of all information around the world and has greatly altered the lives of billions of people.

The evidence is also overwhelming that the COMSAT Building itself is the most important building in Montgomery County because of the impact of its architecture on many buildings around the world. It was one of the earliest designs of Cesar Pelli, who has gone on to become one of the world's greatest living architects. Pelli came to Montgomery County last week to help lead a design exercise for the reuse of his COMSAT Building and to talk about the significance of the building. He declared that the design of a central corridor with rooms branching off it that he used for the COMSAT Building influenced several of his later designs, including the new terminal at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. More significantly, he claimed that the use of experimental aluminum sheathing for COMSAT's walls led Pelli and other architects to develop more sophisticated building skins of stainless steel and other metals, which can be seen on many large, unique buildings around the world.

These extraordinary facts, as well as the finding by the county's Historic Preservation Commission that the building met six of nine possible criteria for historic designation, another rare occurrence, would seem to have all-but-guaranteed support by the Montgomery County Planning Board followed by swift approval by the County Council. Amazingly, what instead happened last July 7 is that the Planning Board, while grudgingly agreeing that the building met at least some historic criteria, recommended against designation because four of the five board members did not believe that the Master Plan recommendations for the property could be achieved if the building remained. Even though the 1994 Master Plan assumed that the COMSAT Building would continue as a research facility, this was their only substantial reason for opposition.

Then, the Planning Board took an even more remarkable action by refusing to forward the nomination to the County Council, claiming that it never forwarded negative recommendations for historic designations to the County Council. When the facts showed that, since 1980, the Planning Board has forwarded hundreds of negative recommendations along with thousands of positive recommendations to the County Council for it to make the final decision, several citizen groups sued the Planning Board last August, asking the court to order the nomination to be sent forward. Before the lawsuit got to court, the Planning Board decided in February to forward the nomination after all.

The County Executive then had 60 days to make his recommendations, and by early May, it was time for the County Council to schedule the hearing. We were too busy to comment, planning for a design charrette not just for the COMSAT Building reuse but for development of the entire 200-acre site it sits on. We hoped to prove that the COMSAT Building and new development could comfortably share the site. We were able to get Cesar Pelli to help us do this. Even though Pelli has never worked with citizen groups and people in this way, he decided that he needed to do this because he is committed to doing anything it takes to save this building that is so important to him and to other architects due to the enormous influence it has had on so many other buildings in the last 40 years.

We held the charrette and it was a tremendous success, with 80 participants and more than 200 people attending the final presentation. We can confidently claim that there is no longer any practical reason to oppose historic designation. However, we've just learned that the rumors we had been hearing for months were true. County Council President George Leventhal has decided that there will be no County Council public hearing for historic designation of the COMSAT Building. Even more astonishing, he has given no reason for this mysterious decision. In the 26 years since the county passed its historic preservation statute and thousands of properties had been evaluated for possible designation, the County Council has NEVER refused to have a public hearing. The conspiracy of silence from the entire County Council concerning this one property has continued since last July when councilmembers first refused to ask the Planning Board to forward the nomination to them.

Rather than worry about their strange behavior last year, we focused on creating a positive activity that we believed would overcome any reservations. Although we succeeded beyond imagination, the Council's silence on the subject has become deafening. No matter how one wants to look at this, one can only conclude that the Council president means to stonewall the process in a secretive way that evokes a new version of the Clarksburg scandal seemingly worse than the original one. With the first Clarksburg scandal, residents could always talk to County officials, even if there was no support for their concerns.

No one who values open government can stand by and let the government silently refuse to follow its laws. Such government is not one or two steps back, but three steps back to an era when county government was not accountable to its people and did whatever it wanted without explanation. Council President Leventhal and the other councilmembers need to hear from hundreds of county residents who demand that there be an explanation for such closed-door behavior and that the people be allowed to testify as soon as possible about the immense value of the internationally-important COMSAT Building. This is the only way that the County Council can retain its credibility that is otherwise at great risk.