



PROGRESSIVELY SPEAKING

MICHAEL TABOR

Food fight

I just attended the signing of a bill into law that I helped initiate. The signing is basically a photo-op where the Maryland Governor, his Lieutenant, the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate all sit, smile and hand out pens.

I harbor a lot of disappointment toward Governor Martin O'Malley, so I was at first reluctant to show up. He'd just allowed an "alcopops" bill to pass and then obliged the phosphate detergent industry by allowing them to spew their product into the Chesapeake Bay for an additional six months. Combine that with his support of slots and the Inter-County Connector, and I'm almost ready for a Draft Peter Franchot for Governor campaign!

The law I had worked on for several years is "Farm-to-Cafeteria" legislation, aimed at getting locally grown vegetables and fruits into public schools. It would encourage food services to purchase and serve fresher, healthier and more palatable foods. Right now they're serving the cheapest food to children, ignoring local or regional farmers.

Last year, Montgomery County school food services executive Kathy Lazor helped defeat a similar bill submitted by Representative Jane Lawton, who died last November. This year the bill was approved. Representative Sheila Hixson and Senator Jamie Raskin, both from District 20, paid tribute to Jane's work by adding her name to the bill.

Children's diet is alarming news. The Washington Post has recently featured the issue on the front page. Obesity and its causes should be a national and international embarrassment. We are getting to be a country of tubby people.

In the end, we the taxpayer will have to deal with the diabetes, strokes, heart attacks, related sicknesses and premature deaths, not to mention the increase in insurance costs and medical costs.

We're betrayed by our own bodies that are designed to store fat in preparation for famines and long treks. And we're exploited by multi-national corporations that bombard us with bad-food advertising.

We're faced with the paradox of more than 800 million people who are hungry and one billion who are overfed. Gastric bypasses, uncurbed appetites, cheap food and starving populations all point to an unsustainable economic system that simply is not working for the earth's population.

A Malthusian-style scenario is brewing. There are food riots in Haiti. The Egyptian military is baking bread for the masses. In fact, 31 countries are currently facing a food crisis. The cost of rice on the international market has risen 141 percent.

Ultimately, we need the societal and

political will to achieve a more sustainable diet. England has poured \$600 million this year into fighting obesity. You can hardly board a London tube train, bus or watch TV without a reminder to eat healthier, locally-grown, more sustainable foods. Our Congress instead encourages large-scale globalized agriculture. In Nigeria, for instance, the traditional cassava root diet has been replaced by imported wheat products.

I support the National Family Farm Coalition (nffc@nffc.net) that is connected with Grassroots International (grassrootsonline.org) and La Via Campesina (viacampesina.org). The vision is of a democratic grassroots movement that gives back control of land, water, seeds, and livelihoods to farmers, farm workers, ranchers, and fishers. The concept, called "Food Sovereignty," opposes global industrial agriculture and institutions like the World Bank and the IMF.

So instead of having starving Ethiopian coffee farmers exporting their product for buyers like Starbucks, they can grow food that feeds their own population. Monsanto would not be able to patent genetically engineered seeds that cannot be saved for planting the next season. Mexicans would be able to grow their own corn instead of becoming dependent on cheap U. S. government-subsidized corn. Jamaicans could grow their own bananas instead of buying Chiquita or Dole multinational products.

Our little Farm-to-Cafeteria law will not solve those global agricultural inequities. But it will be a step in the right direction here in Maryland.



On Saturday, June 14th at 6:00 PM, Michael Tabor will be showing and facilitating a discussion of the films *King Corn* and *The True Cost of Food* at Takoma Village Co-housing. It is a pot luck so bring a dish to share (see if you can use regionally-grown foods) – for 4-6 people. No Coke, Pepsi or junk foods, please. **6827 4th Street NW, Washington, DC 20012.**



PERSONAL POLITICS • RYAN O'DONNELL

What's really going on?

Knowledge is power according to local resident seeking to gather community indicators

If knowledge is power, Bruce Baker has set out to electrify the city of Takoma Park, Silver Spring, and beyond.

Baker recently secured the financial assistance and collaboration of the City Council in pursuit of the Silver Spring Takoma Park Community Indicators Project, a high-tech and highly ambitious proposal to capture, quantify, and analyze key measurements about the neighborhoods we live in.

Familiar measurements reveal only so much, he tells me. Take for instance, the country's gross domestic product, our favorite number for expressing economic health. While it presents a quick snapshot, GDP growth falls short as a measure of progress because other costs, like neglected health, environmental damage, energy spent on commuting, and so on, are hidden inside. Could it be time to look more deeply at what's really going on?

Indicator projects have cropped up in cities from Boston to Baltimore, representing a new trend in community development and government oversight. In many cases, a diversity of more than 100 indicators are considered—air quality, volunteerism, arts patronage, emergency room visits, how people feel about the police, voter turnout, high school drop-out rates, housing availability, and on and on.

Baker's project has yet to finalize the indicators it will use and report on annually. He says it will be "a collaborative process" that lets people determine the measurements that are important to them. For this area, the vital metrics might include the cleanliness of Sligo Creek, the efficiency of the bus system, and maybe even simple questions like, "can you name two of your city council members?"

Lots of community indicators we could imagine are subjective, even though they may derive from objective data. So is there a danger that when we look in the mirror, we may only see what we want to see?

I think that danger is there, especially given how much the city varies from section to section. The regions of Takoma Park traditionally boasting higher engagement will no doubt be the most engaged in the development and assessment of the project. So as the indicators are set and the picture is painted, special care should be taken to ensure that the painting style we employ is realism,

catching both the good and the bad.

But the Indicators Project has the potential to make this work. Weaving geographic information into the final results, reports will include Google-esque maps, illuminating disparities and similarities alike not only neighborhood by neighborhood, but sometimes block by block, depending on the data.

Baker acknowledges there may be some surprises. While "you never know what you're going to find, there will also be things you felt in your gut that are confirmed."

As a former budget expert for the Government Accountability Office, Bruce saw the potential of these emerging techniques for the local level. In our area, the Indicators Project will inform budget deliberations, shedding light on where the greatest needs are, and helping the Mayor, Council, and staff focus services and reduce costs.

Yet, unlike some Indicator programs elsewhere, the Takoma-Long Branch pilot project will not draw up government benchmarks like police presence and response times and other performance measurements within city departments—ideas popularized within Maryland by Governor O'Malley with programs like StatStat and BayStat. Ultimately, that may be a promising direction to explore, especially because indicators like those are ones that officials have control over, whereas some community dimensions, like the frequency of divorce, are beyond their influence.

Bruce has the air of a man who sees the opportunity of mixing idealism with realism, and one who knows with confidence that he has a really awesome idea on his hands. The potential of a project like this is bounded only by the ambition of its originators and participants. After all, the numbers, diagrams, creative non-traditional graphic depictions, charts, scales and comparisons Silver Spring and Takoma Park residents will get to drink in next year won't change anything by themselves.

But the Indicators Project, as its name suggests, shows us the way toward change. Its local champion sums it up—"we could be so much further along, and be a stronger community, if we just understood it better." Here's to the power of knowledge.