

The MONTEBELLO Voice

an independent community gazette

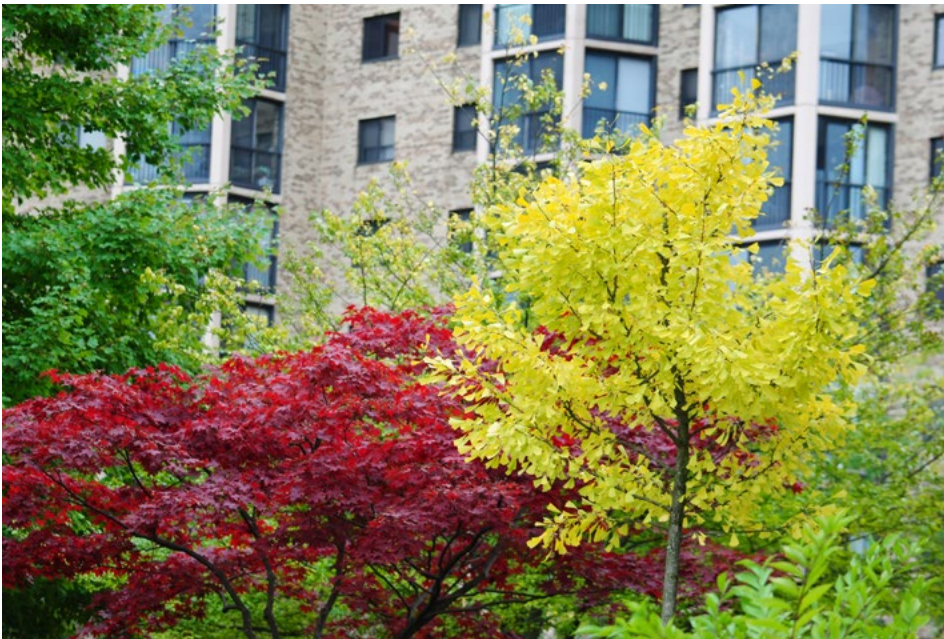
tapestry

November 12, 2023



Pest control

Are you having trouble getting rid of roaches and other pests? Montebello has weekly pest control visits every Tuesday. Just contact the front office for further information and to have your unit added to the list. This service is included in our condo fee. Your neighbors will thank you! – *Eve Shelton* 🏠



*The Montebello
Voice
uncut, uncensored,
unofficial*

*Cover photos by Joan Ledebur
and Dian McDonald*



The MONTEBELLO Voice
an independent gazette
Alexandria, Virginia

This publication accepts no funding or oversight from advertisers, residents, or the Montebello Condominium Unit Owners Association. All opinions are encouraged and reflect the diversity of views in the community. All articles and photographs come from Montebello residents. To receive or contribute to this email-only gazette, contact montebellovoice@cox.net or visit on the web at www.montebellovoice.com.

Editor & Designer
Mikhailina Karina

Contributors
Rodney Fisher, Donna Fowler,
Joan Ledebur, Dian McDonald,
Bob Shea, Amy Symens Smith,
Eve Shelton, Chester Taylor

Photos by Rodney Fisher

All politics is local

By *Mikhailina Karina*

Dear board and management: Please record board meetings and make the recordings available on BuildingLink for future viewing pleasure. You did it with the last candidates' forum, which enabled hundreds of residents to watch (and re-watch) the three-hour long event in manageable chunks. Recording official proceedings is not difficult to implement and would promote your goals of transparency and communication.

Dear neighbors: If you agree that board meetings and work sessions are important to Montebello's governance and should be recorded, please contact board president and management. Your voice matters.

“Ugh, that’s another hour and a half of my life wasted for nothing,” I mutter every single time I walk out of Montebello’s Board of Directors meeting. But I know I’ll be back for more, two or three weeks later, on another Tuesday night at 7:30. Why do I keep torturing myself? Because I believe in the importance of governance on the micro-hyperlocal level that has a direct impact on the about 2,000 people who live here.

Published board minutes don’t include the discussions, questions, and answers on topics that range from amenities to budget allocations to security concerns to engineering updates to staffing issues. All we get in the minutes is the topic and the vote – none of the flavor and nuance that go into decision-making.

On an average night, about two dozen regulars attend the meeting in person and an undisclosed number (projected Zoom screen does not reveal who else is in attendance) from the comfort of their homes. The regulars settle into their usual seats and occasionally whis-

per to each other. After the board discusses each item on the agenda, board president typically solicits questions or comments from the audience. At the end of the meeting, residents are free to address the board and the general manager during the owners’ forum.

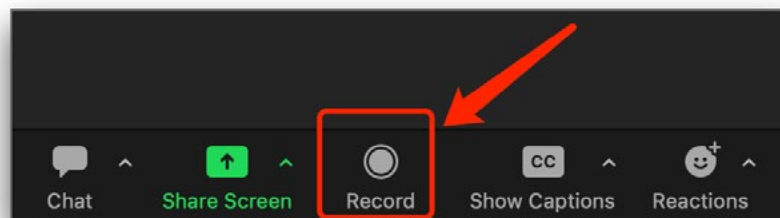
I started attending board meetings when I began publishing *The Voice* in the winter of 2016. As a former local beat reporter for community newspapers in St. Louis, I spent innumerable nights at city council and board of education meetings at municipalities in my coverage area. (Unlike Fairfax County with a single governing body, St. Louis County is made up of nearly 100 cities and townships with independent governing bodies.) I read old articles from the newspaper morgue to familiarize myself with the issues and took careful notes during meetings. If I had follow-up questions, city managers were always available for clarification. To my 23-year-old self, most of the meetings were super-uninteresting with all the

est and I decided to check out what the hubbub was all about. I went to town halls and candidate nights where I heard disgruntled neighbors bring up problems about lack of transparency, lavish spending, poor communication, inaccessibility, uneven application of rules... I was hooked! Neighbors frequently grumble among themselves about the board’s decisions – lobby decor is still a sore issue for many old-timers – but also feel helpless to do anything about it.

Running for board membership and putting in the equivalent of a part-time job each week is a huge ask for people who already have full-time jobs and busy lives. Hence, so few people decide to serve on the board, and we end up with the same handful of candidates each spring. On the one hand, these tenured board members possess deep institutional knowledge going back decades. On the other hand, new voices and differing perspectives are politely heard and told they don’t know what they’re talking about. At least that’s how it looked to me from my corner of the lounge.

One of the major reasons for creating *The Voice* was to provide regular, unbiased, accurate coverage of our board. I took

copious notes and frequently consulted with our former general manager when something needed clarification. He, along with former board president, saw my work as an important service to the community that promoted better communication between the management and the residents. I included board discussions, occasional arguments, and comments from the audience. Although privately, some board members weren’t thrilled with such unexpected transparency and likely self-censored in certain instances, they never tried to shut me down or told me to mind my own business.



zoning and finance mumbo-jumbo, but I knew they were important to residents whose lives were affected by new construction, redistricting, easements, and traffic. People were counting on finding the newspaper on their lawns with accurate information about their tiny municipalities. I felt a huge sense of responsibility to deliver that information.

For nearly two decades, I did not bother to attend Montebello’s board meetings. I was young, busy, and apathetic. Like most residents, I figured that our elected board of experienced professionals was running a tight ship. But then a few issues caught my inter-

During the pandemic, I did not watch board meetings on Zoom. It's not that I suddenly stopped caring. Honestly, it was the proximity to the faces and the weird intimacy of seeing them in their habitats that made me uncomfortable. Preferring to be across the room from the board and feeling like a gnat on the fixture, I couldn't bear to be sitting less than two feet away and watching their talking heads drink from large mugs. I was glad when the meetings returned in-person and staked out a new favorite spot with a great view of the room.

At the last meeting, a detailed explanation of what happened with the

second-hand smoke survey was shared with the audience. It's a hot issue that concerns many residents and continues to generate lively discussions online and in person. I (erroneously) assumed that the explanation with a future course of action would be published by the *Times of Montebello* or sent out as an MML. At least that's what I gathered when my own questions about the survey received a response to that effect when I tried to get this information and was politely dismissed. Nearly two months later, the residents still have no idea how the breach occurred and the next steps. I really shoulda written that story!

Complicity

By Chester Taylor
Montebello Writers Group

The other week I was having lunch with some retired Navy friends of mine. Two were lawyers, one a constitutional lawyer and the other an international lawyer. I asked, "Are we guilty of complicity if we do or say nothing in case of a crime or wrongdoing?" There was a long pause. I could see they felt uncomfortable with the question and wondering where I was going with it. I got the proverbial response from both, "It depends, it's complicated."

I pressed on, "Is Iran guilty of complicity, for funding terrorist organizations that committed atrocities in Israel, even though they didn't directly participate in the attacks? Are the Palestinian people complicit in the attacks of Israel by allowing an extremist organization like Hamas be the political head of their government and knowingly allowed Hamas's military faction to smuggle arms into the Gaza Strip, dig tunnels to hide it, and firing rockets into Israel? Is Israel complicit in its situation by not creating

more economic cooperation with its neighbors?"

All at the table broke loose to assert their opinions as they struggled with the Israel-Hamas War. The only points that all seemed to agree upon were that not all the Palestinian people were guilty of complicity and that a better plan was needed for the care of the civilians caught in the war.*

Over coffee we pursued the matter of complicity further. Between the

silence = complicity?

increasing volume of diverse viewpoints, I managed to insert, "Are politicians and lawyers complicit when failing to uphold the Constitution and the law? Are they complicit when they try to subvert an election and prevent the peaceful transfer of power? Are they complicit when they knowingly lie about the results? Are they complicit for favoring, promoting, or giving sweetheart tax breaks to the petroleum and gas industries, the tobacco companies, or gun manufacturers who donate

I get that 90 percent of the residents have better things to do than sit for an hour (or longer) listening to the latest administrative news. But it's crucially important "to be in the room where it happens," to paraphrase Hamilton. Thanks to the miracle of technology, everyone can be in the virtual room. I've made this request in the past and will do so again: management, please press the record button and upload the link for future viewing pleasure. It's good governance. 📺

millions to their campaign fund? Is it right that in court lawyers invent fictions to help their clients escape prosecution?"

As I drove home after lunch, I wondered what about us as individuals. "Are we complicit when we fail to intervene against wrongful actions? How guilty are we when we fail to speak out against injustice?" I had no doubt of the complicity of those who ignore the truth and cling to lies. The same for those who use podcasts for hate speech or those that verbally bash minorities.

Well, the lawyers were right, it is complicated and depends. I still wonder, "What have we become when we lack the motivation to say or do nothing? Perhaps a broken world."

**In January 2006 the Palestinians in Gaza held an election in which Hamas won by 44 percent and the more moderate Fatah party won 41 percent. Not willing to form a unity government, Hamas murdered Fatah members and took complete control of the Gaza Strip. 📺*

“I can guarantee a wall that will last 500 years,”

Robert Willan told our group.

Unenforceable? Yes. Hyperbole? No.

Willan is a master stonemason in England’s Lake District who specializes in building drystone walls. Lean and ruddy, with a warm smile and contagious enthusiasm, he wasn’t bragging, merely noting the remarkable durability of these walls. Found throughout Europe and dating back at least to the Neolithic era, drystone walls are an iconic feature of rural landscape in the United Kingdom. Picture green meadows sprinkled with sheep and bounded by low stone walls that seem to wander whimsically, at times almost crazily.

While Willan’s 500-year guarantee invites skepticism, the UK has drystone walls thousands of years old. They’re built without mortar, held up by friction and gravity. Because they move with the land when it shifts, they remain stable and upright for centuries. Water drains through them, instead of getting trapped inside by mortar and creating decay, further supporting their longevity.

They provide safe homes for small animals, and they guide farmers through their fields in the impenetrable fog that often settles on the area. When walls need repair, stones from the failing section can be reused. These walls embrace the landscape; they don’t fight with – or attempt to conquer – it.

I was familiar with this type of wall, from my childhood home in New York’s Hudson Valley. Generally straight and disciplined there, they mark roads or boundaries. I found the meandering walls of England and Scotland romantic in their liting patterns and worn

steadiness. They conjured ancient times. And they seemed to beckon: Follow me.

The craft of building drystone walls persists, waning and reviving over time. The Neolithic site of Skara Brae in Scotland, older than Egypt’s pyramids, displays the drystone walls of small res-

table decay a central feature of his technique. He says, “I was always interested in seeing work change and decay,” but eventually he decided to “make change an integral part of a work’s purpose.”

He also creates works using age-old drystone techniques: cairns, walls, small buildings. At the Storm King Art Center in New York, Goldsworthy’s drystone *Storm King Wall*, sometimes called “a wall that went for a walk,” runs over hills, through a pond, and around trees for 2,278 feet. He created the wall in 17 days, with 5 men and 250 tons of stones found on the Storm King grounds. It is said that a master drystone waller, as they are called, only needs to touch a stone once to place it accurately.

Like his ancient predecessors, he works with what he finds in his environment, often using only his hands, teeth, and found objects as tools. Locally, Goldsworthy’s work is on display at the National Gallery of Art and National Museum of the American Indian in DC and at the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, MD. He says his art strives “to make connections between what we call nature and

what we call man-made.”

Neolithic humans likely would not have put it that way, but their work reflects ideas still useful today. Work with, not against, the lay of the land. Use local materials. Consider the creatures affected by what you build: can you refrain from harming them, maybe even help them? Build for longevity and repair with what’s at hand. Today’s constructions won’t come with a 500-year guarantee, except maybe for Willan’s walls, but this approach seems kinder to our world. 🏠



The 500-year guarantee

By Donna Fowler
Montebello
Writers
Group

Drystone wall, Grasmere, England

idences, built into the earth for insulation from the cold. The craft now has an array of associations and trusts in various countries to protect its legacy, teach drystone walling techniques, and advocate for conservation of the walls.

While their initial intent was practical – keep the sheep in, set boundaries – rather than artistic, drystone walls also have become art. Robert Willan has worked with British artist Andy Goldsworthy, who creates ephemeral works made of ice, twigs, leaves, and even shadows, their natural and inevi-



Andy Goldsworthy, Roof, 2004-2005, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Photos by Donna Fowler



Skara Brae archeological site, Orkney Islands, Scotland

Like ducks all in a row...or not?

By Bob Shea

Uniforms create... well... uniformity.

They work well for marching bands, athletic teams, and military units, but do they have a place in society at large?

Parochial and a few public schools often mandate official school uniforms. That makes sense because such codes blur socio-economic divides potentially on full display at an age when clothes made a difference to young folks who are just trying to fit in. It also creates a sense of camaraderie.

I attended a New England all-boys prep school where slacks, shirts and ties, and a sport coat were mandatory for all classes and all meals except Saturday night dinner and Sunday breakfast. We had uniformity. We all fit in. But did we?

In some instances, the words “acceptable dress code” take the place of uniforms. Society over the ages has allowed various dress codes to exist, not by mandate but by convention.

Look at an old black-and-white photo of Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium, and what do you see? Mainly all male spectators (the wives were at home being homemakers) dressed in

white shirts, ties, sport coats, and felt hats (like the one Tom Landry wore as a coach of the Dallas Cowboys). It was the mores of the times. Now a team jersey, a ball cap on backwards, and a beer in hand is the standard. For an NFL game, a painted face and a beer in each hand is the norm.

In the early days of aviation, when only the wealthy could afford to fly, men wore suits and ladies were in Sunday-best attire on Pan Am and TWA flights. Now, one’s cleanest dirty t-shirt, distressed shorts, and flip flops

are the attire of the flying public. Maybe that is not surprising, for when Pan Am and TWA were flying, they treated their passengers as special people. Can you say “customer service?” Now, especially in economy class, the passenger is treated about as well as steerage passengers on the old immigrant ships en route to Ellis Island.

Office casual Fridays evolved. Then it became all-week casual. In some businesses, wearing whatever was on top of the pile of dirty clothes in the bedroom corner is today’s attire. With work-at-home popularity, pajama bottoms and fuzzy slippers are probably the standard on any portion of the body not seen on a Zoom screen.

tors demanding that the dress code be reinstated. It was argued that the more formal attire speaks to the solemnity of the Congress’ role just as judges’ robes create dignity in the courtroom.

One might ask when did either chamber of Congress last do anything that could possibly be called solemn?

Maybe Senator Schumer has recognized the true nature of national politics. What is wrong with Senator Susan Collins (R) of Maine, after a day at the beach, wearing a bikini to the debates? Or Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) from wearing a Federalist Society polo shirt to a debate? Or Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) from appearing in a I Love Coal hat?

It opens up a wide-ranging dress code for our elected leaders, and maybe introduces needed truth to the legislative process.

Why not require each senator to dress like a NASCAR driver? In lieu of suits and ties, why not let them wear one-piece coveralls, emblazoned with their sponsors’ names and logos? It would certainly be colorful as well as more honestly displaying to whom they were beholden. Just as the name of a company on the side of a NASCAR vehicle gives exposure to those paying a huge fee, each senator

could do that when roaming the Senate hallways or when giving pontificating political speeches to an empty chamber for the CSPAN camera, proudly wearing the logos of their favorite lobbyists and campaign donors.

Is a dress code needed to remind us all of the importance of “a still noble goal of consensus?” In these tribal times, are there more important issues than Senator Fetterman’s hoodie and shorts?

In my mind, the answer to both questions is a resounding “yes and yes.” 🐼



The “dress down” has even entered the hallowed halls of the U.S. Senate. Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) recently instructed the Senate’s sergeant-at-arms to stop enforcing the chamber’s unofficial dress code. For decades it required a suit and tie for men and dresses that covered the shoulders or pantsuits for women. The ruling apparently was to allow Senator John Fetterman (D-PA) to roam the floor in his trademark hooded sweatshirt and shorts as if a bald 6-foot 8-inch guy would run the risk of blending in. Republican outrage was swift with 46 GOP sena-



Photos by Joan Ledebur

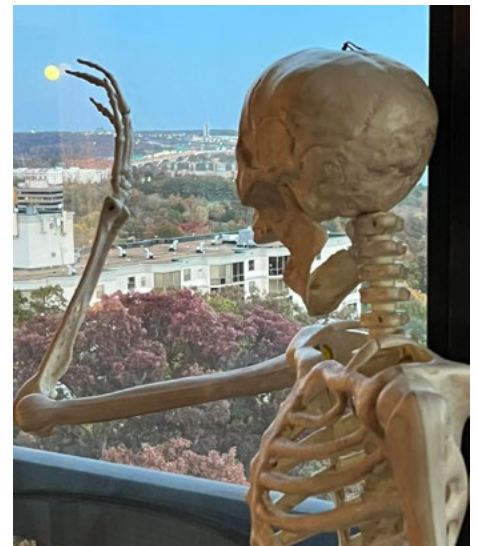
Chico's Montebelles





Photos by Joan Ledebur and Dian McDonald

a day in the afterlife



final glance

