



SAVING MONEY, SAVING PEACE

By Mary McGrory

Column: MARY MCGRORY

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This is a genuinely shocking story. It's about one community's positive and productive encounter with the D.C. government. I warn you, it has a happy ending. Furthermore, it provided inhabitants of *Klingle Road* with an unlikely new hero, the city's chief engineer, Gary Burch, a 20-year veteran of the District Building.

Before I go any further, let me confess an interest. My condo overlooks *Klingle Road*. The street was closed five years ago when the severe erosion between Woodley Road and Porter Street washed it out. The peace is wonderful. Now instead of the constant buzz and whoosh of traffic, there is only the occasional shouting of bands of boys who walk by on weekends and the barking of dogs at twilight -- one starts and you get a chorus that goes on until they are all hoarse, apparently because no one wants to be the first to stop. Bids were going out on contracts to restore the road to full traffic.

I met Burch, a tall, quiet 50-year-old area native and graduate of its schools, at a painting party at the cement barriers that keep traffic off the seven-tenths of a mile stretch that runs downhill to Rock Creek Park. It would cost \$5 million to repair the road, \$2.7 million of which would come from the depleted D.C. treasury, and the balance from federal funds. While children daubed at angels and animals, he surveyed the lovely grove and said, "I think we have more important things to spend it on." His stated mission: "To be sensitive and responsive to the community. Many of the people I work with want to pave things. I try to find out what the community needs."

To understand how preposterous his proposition is, it is necessary only to read the daily papers, which chronicle an endless saga of inefficiency and aggressive indifference, a combination that gives the city its bad name and a return of congressional rule.

Leaving aside the chronic problems of uncollected garbage and the collective rudeness of the clerks, D.C. manages to have a mess a week. Last week's outrage was farce: no toilet paper in city building restrooms -- as is so often the case, the District failed to pay its bills. But there is a steady stream of shockers that illustrate the official attitude of the local government, which is not to get involved even with children. There are federal funds, for instance, to provide bus tokens for homeless children to get to and from school. Obviously everyone would be better off if they did. The District declined to participate.

Members of the Klingle Valley Park Association, formed when the reopening of the road seemed imminent, approached the District Building with trepidation. An organization of high-powered professionals, journalists and academics, they represented the neighborhood through which Klingle passes after it climbs up the hill from Porter Street. The patch of the road that is a leafy glade had become a sanctuary for walkers, joggers, cyclists. They liked it that way.

Residents of Porter Street were not so sure. The three leaders of the anti-asphalt group,

"Meet the Press" maestro Tim Russert, Georgetown law and government professor Robert Katzman and author Steve Solomon ("The Confidence Game"), were pleasantly surprised at their first District Building meeting.

Says Russert, "I went to the District Building expecting to meet a bureaucrat who liked to build roads. But Burch didn't just understand the topography and the traffic patterns, and the damaged drains, he knew the neighborhood." Katzman called the first meeting "overwhelming. Burch listened to us. He told us that if we behaved in a rational way it would count -- if we got people together, we would get somewhere."

They were stunned when Burch took a furlough day to come and walk in the woods with them to hear their views about a bicycle path, and picnic tables among the majestic oak and tulip poplars and elms. Burch is not one of those District employees who can't be bothered to take advantage of federal funds. If the District cleans up the storm drains, the National Park Service might take over maintenance.

The neighborhood flung itself into civic activity. Isabel Furlong, who lives at the corner of 32nd and Klingle, stood outside the Giant and collared 1,600 signers for a petition to keep Klingle closed. On Earth Day, John Garamendi, ex-candidate for governor of California and new resident, marshaled 112 people for a massive cleanup.

Solomon says the neighborhood has been transformed by this civic activity and there is a dramatic rise in friendliness. Katzman will teach Burch in his government class. As for Burch, he's glad it's all coming out so well. He knows the government to which he has given 20 years has the name of being dysfunctional -- "we all have that feeling" -but that is no excuse for giving up. "We keep working and hope for the best," he says.

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