

"Federation Corner" column
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Quality of life threatened by increasing growth without providing infrastructure

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The Quality of Life in Montgomery County is being threatened yet again by the potential of increasing growth without providing the necessary infrastructure that should accompany it. Members of our County Council would like to bring back the failed policies of the past to further congest our roads and overcrowd our schools.

We as a Community need to focus our attention on what I believe will be the most important decision the Montgomery County Council will make in this election cycle: changes to the Annual Growth Policy (AGP). Our land use and planning process, and the AGP that governs it, at one time was the envy of the nation--a nationally recognized and admired system to manage development and growth while retaining and even improving the quality of life for our residents. That was before the County Council created exceptions and amended it in order to pander to developer interests. The old growth policy, even with its deficiencies, imposed building moratoriums in areas that lacked adequate school capacity (however not as often as it should have) and transportation infrastructure, and where improvements could not be provided in a timely manner.

After years of pandering to developers and manipulating the land use process, the AGP has become a toothless, ineffective document. The rate of growth has gotten out of hand. Excessive development is already straining schools and roads throughout the county. We seem to lack either the financial resources or the political will (maybe both) to correct the deficiencies in our public infrastructure much less accelerate building to accommodate additional future growth.

The current council is considering, in the name of "affordable housing," allowing developers to build more housing units and increase densities in our master plans and provided for by our present infrastructure, led by Council members Silverman and Floreen. In fact, Ms Floreen stated you cannot slow down growth to catch-up on infrastructure--her words. They are considering steps that would take us back to the failed policy called "Pay and Go" which has and still is creating havoc in many parts of the county.

"Pay and Go" allowed developers to pay a small fee and go forward with their developments despite inadequate infrastructure. We cannot allow this to occur any longer. At the very least we must require this government to either cap new development to levels of growth that are sustainable or simply fix the existing AGP (policy area review) without the loopholes that have and are continuing to overburden our infrastructure. This will allow government time to catch up with the lack of infrastructure. It is time we the citizens demand honest and effective planning.

And speaking of inadequate infrastructure, you need only reflect on recent power outages to understand the consequences of inadequate infrastructure. The Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) has just gone through a major test, and in my opinion failed miserably. Hurricane Isabel was a big storm; however, it was forecast days in advance allowing ample time for both consumers and the utility company to prepare. What we saw was a severe breakdown in the power distribution network across the region.

Speaking as a professional electrical contractor, this breakdown should never have been allowed to occur. The power distribution network is aging and is being taxed by over-development with few upgrades being implemented. When we redo our roads we should simultaneously be upgrading our distribution network by installing underground duct-ways and electrical networking beneath the road surface.

A few years ago the power companies were deregulated, and what we saw was our local power company placing emphasis on generating profits for its shareholders rather than electricity. They sold off their power generation division of their company because it wasn't profitable. This is not unusual for private business and you can't blame them for trying to make a profit. But have the benefits of deregulations been outweighed by the loss of efficient and dependable customer service?

Power outages seem increasingly frequent and of longer duration. Following Hurricane Isabel, schools were closed for almost a week. Businesses and governments were forced to close. Workers were forced to stay home or, with public transit closed down, endure impossibly long and dangerous commutes. The homebound elderly and those with life threatening conditions suffered severely and could have even died because of prolonged power outage. Homeowners lost hundreds of dollars worth of perishable foodstuffs because PEPCO wasn't prepared to distribute dry ice efficiently and reliably. Residents who come from third world countries compare unfavorably PEPCO's ability to recover after a hurricane to that of the power suppliers in places like Dacca and Trinidad.

Are high maintenance standards and infrastructure upgrading sacrificed for profits? Many people think so. I believe there must be an investigation of PEPCO. Our elected officials should have PEPCO reviewed and a report be prepared for the County Council and General Assembly to see if there is sufficient routine maintenance, structural upgrading needs, and adequate emergency preparedness and response. I also believe PEPCO should be held responsible for all losses to personal property as a result of their massive failure.

I would like to leave you with something my father used to tell me about politicians. He said, "When a politician is green he is ripe, but when he is ripe he is rotten." My father meant that when a politician is new to office he will do anything he can to enhance his standing with those that elected him. But when a politician has been in office for a while he becomes self-serving. His main concern becomes staying in office and doing whatever he must do to protect his job. I think we need to remind our elected officials that we elect them and that we have the votes to give to others who will better serve our interests.