

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - April 27, 2006

Concerns about future development the county must address

by Dan Wilhelm
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At the February 2005 Reality Check Conference, participants from all parts of the entire metropolitan area identified in broad conceptual terms where housing and commercial/retail development should occur over the next 25 years. Most of the 60 breakout groups agreed to:

- Concentrate development near existing towns and other hubs of economic activity and focus development near transit stations and along existing corridors
- Better balance jobs and housing on a geographic area basis
- Preserve and protect natural areas, green spaces, and waterways

Building upon the Reality Check Conference, the Planning Board is now considering changes to the way it guides and regulates land use in Montgomery County. The staff will be holding three community-based discussions on May 3, May 17 and September 27. The first two will be held at The Johns Hopkins University in Rockville between 6:30 PM and 9:30 PM and the third will be held at Brookside Gardens. At the time I am writing this, there are almost 165 people signed up to attend the first two discussions. Each discussion builds on the prior one and they cover the following in order:

- Explore the physical impacts of demographic trends, changing community needs, evolving lifestyle preferences, and the opportunities they represent. </p>
- Provide an opportunity for participants to explore challenges and choices associated with future growth, change, and community needs
- Consider implementation strategies and priorities with local experts and the civic and business leadership.

The second discussion includes presentations from three national experts followed by a short comments and questions period from five local leaders, including yours truly. I have yet to learn what the national experts will say. One early piece of information is that the housing demand over the next 30 years will be toward apartments, town-houses and small-lot detached units (defined as being under 7000 sq feet). Apparently much of the future housing could be placed in or around existing activity centers through redevelopment.

One issue I want addressed is transportation. Our roads are currently severely congested, so a huge concern is how to add large numbers of additional people and households without causing more congestion. Sure, road improvements can be made and will be helpful. The major changes to our existing four-lane and six lane roads MCCF supports make select intersections grade-separated. We have been lobbying for such improvements just to address existing congestion.

One idea being talked about is to reduce existing capacity on existing four and six lane roads to encourage transit use and to strengthen neighborhoods. I support improved transit use and strengthening neighborhoods but by using the "carrot" approach, that is, make the alternative approach appealing to those affected. The County must focus on addressing existing bus service shortcomings and the State must provide more transitways. The County also must integrate planning for transportation and land use. Today, land-use decisions and transit decisions are largely made without considering the other. No wonder they don't work together to move people and to create strong neighborhoods. Also the County must fund

improvements to be built concurrent with development, rather than years or decades later as is their current practice.

My second issue that needs to be addressed is that citizens must be an integral part of the planning process. Today citizens have little say in what gets put into the master plans. The planning staff idea for the future is to create master plans that focus on the redevelopment of a small area. I am for the smaller master plan but all parties must be at the table when they are being drafted, not just the planning staff. In addition to the planning staff, citizens, developers, and as a minimum transit (and to a lesser extent road) designers from DPWT must also be involved. The master plan process needs to follow the Concordia process used with four master plans in eastern Montgomery County during the 1990s. In the development of these plans, citizens had a real voice. The staff and citizens strove to develop a plan based upon consensus, and where agreement could not be reached the Staff Draft plan documented the conflicts so that the Board could focus on the conflicts and address them.