

"Federation Corner" column
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Be skeptical of Santas promising transportation solutions

by Wayne Goldstein

It's the season of promises. No, I'm not talking Christmas lists and promises made by jolly fat men overdressed in red, although perhaps we could call this season Christmas in August. It's the election season of promises and if voters took the promises made about transportation as seriously as children take Christmas promises, our incumbents would be in trouble and their challengers would be as challenged by the voters as Santa would be by those children who didn't get that pony last year. It helps these Santas that their promises are only made once every four years, and are made to adults who don't have the memories they had as young children about previous transportation priorities like ponies or current priorities like more road and transit improvements.

As it turns out, we once had a Santa Claus in this county. For three years, from 1987 to 1989, he promised everything and delivered even more. This Santa, more serious than jolly, and not at all fat, was named Sid Kramer, and he played the role as credible transportation promise maker as County Executive. In 1988, his most generous year - in his second capital budget - he recommended that \$586.3 million be spent on transportation for the next six years, including \$339.8 million for road projects. The 1988 County Council decided to top Santa Kramer, approving \$611.4 million for transportation, an additional \$25 million.

By comparison, earlier this year, his most generous year, County Executive Doug Duncan - of *Go Montgomery!* fame - recommended that \$493.8 million be spent on transportation, with \$154.3 million for roads. This County Council, apparently feeling either bountiful or wanting to End Gridlock, approved \$680 million, adding almost \$186 million to the transportation pot, including \$156 million for "State Transportation Participation."

By now, this handful of numbers may already be making your head hurt, but try to stick with me. Inflation happens, so numbers from 1988 need to be adjusted to account for increases in prices so I can accurately compare them with 2006 numbers. When I do that, using the webtool www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi, Sid Kramer's 1988 transportation funding recommendation would be \$951.4 million in 2006; his 1988 road funding recommendation would be \$551.4 million, and the County Council's 1988 approval would be \$992.1 million.

In other words, Sid Kramer, who strongly supported an annual growth policy that required infrastructure improvements to keep pace with development, recommended 93% more dollars for transportation, and 257% more dollars for roads in his most generous year, as compared to Doug Duncan in his most generous year, 4 years after the release of his much ballyhooed *Go Montgomery!* initiative. Even though this County Council, by increasing funding 38% higher this year than recommended by the county executive, made a "record" of sorts, this "record" increase was still exceeded by the 1988 County Council by 46% in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Let's not forget that the 1988 county population was 710,000 and the 2006 county population is about 950,000. This means that even if today's transportation spending was identical to 1988 inflation-adjusted spending, it would still be one-third less per person today than in 1988. Based on this year's 6-year capital budget, County Executive Doug Duncan recommended that the county spend \$520 per person on transportation. The County Council approved spending \$716 per person. By comparison, County Executive Sid Kramer recommended in 1988 that the county spend \$1340 per person, and the 1988 County Council approved \$1397 per person.

This year, this County Council decided to start paying for transit and road projects that are normally paid for by the state by spending \$15 million the first year, then \$30 million each for the second and third year, ending with \$50 million in the sixth year. In the first year, \$5 million will be spent to design a new entrance to the Bethesda Metro, \$8 million to buy land and move utilities at Georgia Ave. and Randolph Rd., and \$2.4 million for the I-270/Watkins Mill Rd. interchange. This effort is known as forward-funding, with the expectation/hope that the state will eventually reimburse the county for what the state would normally pay for. This approach has also been used to build some county schools. In a variation of this, the county is building the Montrose Parkway, which would have been a state-funded road except that the state refused to pay for it. The county decided the road was needed and is paying for all of it.

The County Council has been criticized for this forward-funding because of the possibility that the county will not be reimbursed. Obviously, if the County Council hadn't decided to commit to forward funding, county transportation spending would be even more inadequate. The question that should perhaps instead be asked is whether or not the county is spending all that is needed to maintain and improve the existing transportation infrastructure. Since there is a limit on new roads, because there is no where to put them in developed parts of the county, then the emphasis will have to be on transit. Since the county won't be taking on the funding of the Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitway, this leaves bus transit as the only place to make improvements. County spending on transit infrastructure has been very inconsistent, although it has improved in this most recent capital budget. Doug Duncan, Mr. *Go Montgomery!*, increased his transportation recommendations by 4% since 2002. This County Council, to its credit, instead chose to increase transportation spending by 61% since 2002, although most of the increase happened this year and was dedicated to pay for state-funded projects. Transportation capital funding is still far below the late '80s and there is no plan to catch up. *Go Montgomery!* is little more than a dated slogan and the name of a small program.

So, if you choose to read through the campaign literature you have received and will receive in ever more massive amounts in the next three weeks, keep this column by your side. Everybody complains about traffic and those running for office say they will do something about it. Do you believe that those who made transportation promises in 2002 kept them? Do you believe they can keep the ones they are making in 2006? Do you believe that their challengers will do better? Should you trust the Santa who promised you the pony for each of the last four years or should you place your trust in any of the new Santas offering their laps to you today?