

"Federation Corner" column
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Real plans for slow growth

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In the November elections, our new County Executive and a majority of the members of the 2006-2010 County Council campaigned on the promise to slow growth so that infrastructure could catch up. Their victories are seen as a clear mandate that most voters want a slowdown in creation of new housing and jobs, which exacerbate the need for housing, while the focus shifts to providing needed schools, transportation, and services to support existing development. However, citizens should guard against having such high expectations that we become disillusioned when no immediate relief is seen.

It took years for the county to reach its current level of infrastructure deficit. In the decade between 1996 and 2005 there was an average of 7420 new jobs created annually, bringing the total to 458,600 jobs. There was an annual average of 3440 housing completions in the county, bringing the total number to over 360,000 dwellings. And around 150,000 residents were added in the past 10 years, bringing the population to 965,434--more residents than seven states of the Union.

Over the same 10 year period, the number of classroom trailers in schoolyards increased from 200 to 719. One of every six intersections with signal lights now has more traffic than it can handle in weekday rush hours. And this past year a Council study determined the county government has nearly a 20 year backlog for needed maintenance or replacement of public buildings and infrastructure.

The fact is that accelerated growth will likely continue for some time. There is a "pipeline" of projects approved but not yet built totaling 30,000 dwelling units plus enough commercial space to allow creation of tens of thousands of jobs. The capacity exists to create up to 75,000 new dwelling units under existing zoning in place on properties in the county. So, the effects of any adjustment in the growth policy to slow the pace of development may not be evident for years. A colleague likens the situation to an ocean liner needing to make a course correction--there will be a delay between making a hard tug on the steering wheel and a noticeable change in direction.

We must, however, challenge the claim that a 1% rate of growth is modest. That might be so for the majority of Maryland counties which have a population of less than 100,000, where a 1% annual growth rate equates to 1,000 added residents. But, in Montgomery County the same 1% growth rate would result in ten times that number of new residents annually, and require more new housing than the ten-year county average mentioned above.

Some officials may claim that a move to slow the rate of residential growth is selfish, similar to a desire to "pull up the ladder" by those already on the boat. But the county's master plan acknowledges that the county will reach buildout, or optimum scale, probably some time after 2030. It is not too soon to explore processes and effects of slowing or halting growth. Yet even in a fixed population jurisdiction there will always be turnover that frees up housing for the newly-arrived. No one is actually proposing shutting the door to newcomers, and exaggerated political rhetoric does not contribute to a healthy discussion.

While exploring sustainability, we will discover that progress and improvement do not require growth, just as growth does not necessarily result in progress and improvement. And we can learn from and share with others facing the same situation, those suburban areas in the U.S. and other countries that are also nearing buildout.

In the coming year, our officials will work to meet immediate infrastructure needs while they also consider long term changes to the growth policy. As we near optimum scale, we need to consider the tools necessary to thrive in the coming environment. The challenge will be to curb growth incentives, such as regular upzoning of properties during master plan revisions, yet sustain economic vitality, generate adequate revenue, hold down taxes, and insure affordably priced housing.

The following are suggested short term objectives:

- calculate the scope of the need for workforce housing by determining how many county employees living elsewhere would like to live in the county, but cannot find appropriate and affordable housing. Those numbers can be extrapolated to estimate the housing needs of the private sector. In addition, while we seek to create new affordably priced housing we must work to retain the existing stock.
- discover ways to allow seniors to comfortably retire in place, and not be taxed out of the homes in which they raised their families and in which they hope to live out their golden years.
- explore ways to retain indigenous small businesses, the local serving "mom-n-pop" stores, if rental prices escalate in retail areas undergoing redevelopment.
- improve neighborhood-serving transit that feeds into the subway and MetroBus routes. Although we are creating walkable/bikeable communities near Metro stations to reduce vehicular traffic, the 2000 census found that regionally only 30% of those living within one mile of a Metro station regularly use mass transit (including those who walk and bike). We should expect that development even in these "smart growth" areas will significantly add to traffic congestion.
- assess the carrying capacity of the current Metro system. Even using eight-car trains during rush hours and new cars with added capacity, stations can only handle a maximum of one train every two minutes. Growth in our upcounty and beyond is quickly increasing Metro ridership at the Glenmont and Shady Grove terminus stations, calling into question the wisdom of continued densification around downcounty stations.

As new County Executive Ike Leggett has repeatedly stated, the problems that confront our county cannot be solved by this county alone, but will require a holistic regional approach to deal with the impacts of growth. Citizens must be mindful that there are no quick fixes, while we continue to observe and participate in county government to insure that the course corrections made meet with our approval.