

"Federation Corner" column

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Road Code bill presents unique opportunity for cooperation

by Wayne Goldstein

Two weeks ago, I wrote about the lack of a comprehensive environmental section to the proposed changes to Bill 48-06, "Streets and Roads - Comprehensive Revisions." I now believe that the County Council is very interested in this additional essential element. I know of at least one major builder in the county which is interested in making use of pervious pavement. In addition, this week, the City of Rockville's Planning Commission will be hearing about the comparison of costs to use "porous" [pervious] concrete for the surface of the Thomas Farm Community Center parking lot surface.

Montgomery County has a unique resource related to this issue because the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association (NRMCA) is headquartered in downtown Silver Spring. In fact, on its main page today is this item: "The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), the nation's largest property owner and facilities manager, is among the latest clients of significance to come under NRMCA's National Accounts Program and demonstrate a strong interest in pervious concrete."

The final participants needed at this large table are representatives of both the county's Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT), Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Department of Permitting Services (DPS), all of which deal with stormwater runoff in some capacity as part of their regular duties. The hallmark of the initial proposed changes in this bill are to simultaneously narrow the amount of pavement allowed for cars to use for travel on roads while widening the right of way for these roads to allow for bike paths, more and wider sidewalks, and room to plant trees, which can also mean room to install swales to hold rain gardens. Narrowing roads slows down traffic while shortening the distances for pedestrians to cross the roads.

The initial obvious goal of this bill is to increase both pedestrian and driver safety. It also lays the groundwork to protect the environment by reducing the amount of pavement. The proposed amendment to create a "green streets" program builds on the environmental protection initiated by the plan for narrower roads. In addition, the cost savings generated by building narrower roads can then be used to help pay for additional costs generated for green features such as rain gardens and pervious sidewalks.

We will soon know what DPWT, DEP and DPS think of the road code and green streets proposed changes. Apparently, environmental planners at MNCPPC are skeptical about the long term reliability of pervious pavement. Given that the NRMCA headquarters is about four blocks from MNCPPC headquarters, it seems that this shouldn't be too great a distance to be bridged. It is only a little farther to connect with the county agencies that are located in Rockville. All of these agencies can take the first step by looking over NRMCA's web site. They will find dozens of documents, including those with such titles as "Freeze-Thaw Resistance of Pervious Concrete", "Certification Policies for Pervious Concrete Craftsmen and Technicians", and a video about pervious concrete titled: "Concrete is Green - Environmentally Sound - Sustainable - Supports LEED."

Although any national trade organization such as NRMCA must represent the economic and political interests of its members, any objectively verifiable technical studies done by this organization that can assist Montgomery County in charting a new "road" for its streets and roads demands the closest scrutiny at this time of change in how we try to better manage our relationship with both the built and natural environment for the benefit of all. The City of Rockville has already begun this effort by doing their own research and evaluation. It is a most opportune time for Montgomery County to do the same, and to do so with all county agencies working together so that they can all learn the same information at the same time and better evaluate it through the combination of their various expertises.

None of the participants should seek an independent and isolated course because collaboration is essential to success in an increasingly complex learning and decision-making process that must evaluate so many different variables at the same time. Montgomery County has already embraced this approach by deciding to require certification of most new public and private buildings through the LEED process. Success using LEED requires the recognition and analysis of the interplay of every aspect of building operation with each other and the environment to achieve better energy efficiency and environmental protection. If county government can require a complex structure like a building to be simultaneously evaluated using multiple criteria in this way, then it certainly can require the same of simpler structures like roads.

We hold our government officials to a high standard of behavior because, as regulators, they cannot ask the public to do more than they do without generating charges of hypocrisy and creating great dissent. As we seek to protect our environment even as we continue to grow, we need to focus on the fact that the largest government-owned asset and responsibility is not public buildings but public roads. If the government will not take the best available actions to better protect the users of these roads, who are also the users of the environment that is negatively impacted by stormwater runoff from these roads, then how can the government expect and demand more responsible behavior from its citizens?

Right now, we have a confluence of organizations and opportunities which can allow all of us to move forward together with greater knowledge and thus with greater confidence that we can do much better. Let's all join together to make the best of this.