

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Time to revisit the growth policy**

by Jim Humphrey  
Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

Every two years in the odd-numbered year, the Montgomery County Council takes a look at the county growth policy and considers adjustments. As you may recall, the previous Council struck down the Annual Growth Policy process that had been in place since 1986, disregarding the Planning Board recommendation not to do so.

The AGP had been instituted to insure compliance with the 1973 Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, which requires that new development not be approved unless the county infrastructure--roads, transit, schools and services--can accommodate it. The 2003 Council left in place only intersection and schools capacity tests that are so skewed to allow development they have yet to stop a project from being approved. By the way, in 2005 then-Chairman of the Planning Board Derick Berlage came back to the Council and testified that the process had indeed been broken in 2003, and urged the Council to reinstate a modified version of the old AGP. But a majority of that Council voted to keep the altered process in place.

This year the Council will again discuss possible changes to the growth policy, with a vote planned to take place before the August recess. The Planning Board has been discussing aspects of the growth policy for a few months now, with an eye toward approving a set of recommendations they will make to the Council. Four teams have been formed of members of the Planning staff, each focusing on an aspect of the growth issue and deliberating a set of options they will present to the Planning Board.

The Planning Board did submit an initial report on growth policy to the Council in February, and filed an interim report in March. Those and other documents are available on a growth policy webpage on the Park and Planning website, which can be accessed at <http://www.mcparkandplanning.org/development/agp/agphome.shtml>

### **Planning Board Growth Forum on May 5**

As an additional aid in helping the Commissioners decide what changes to suggest to the Council, the Planning Board will hold a Growth Forum on Saturday, May 5. It will take place from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the auditorium at Park and Planning headquarters, located at 8787 Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring. The event will begin with a panel of five representatives of the civic community and five representatives from the development industry engaging in a one-hour discussion led by Planning Board Chair Royce Hanson. I am pleased to have been invited to sit on the panel. Following the panel discussion, the Chair will entertain questions and comments from the audience. The meeting is open to the public. No reservations are needed.

### **May 14 MCCF meeting program on growth policy**

At the Civic Federation's monthly meeting on May 14, Karl Moritz, head of the Research and Technology Center at Park and Planning, will discuss the growth policy and possible changes to it. Although the Planning Board will not yet have taken a formal vote on their recommendations to the County Council, Karl will share the preliminary findings of the four staff working groups focused on the areas of adequate public facilities, fiscal impact of growth, sustainability, and quality of design. There will be a question and answer period following Karl's presentation. The May 14 MCCF meeting will begin at 7:45 p.m. in the first floor auditorium of the County Council Building in Rockville, and the public is encouraged to attend.

### **Some facts to bear in mind**

- The Population Clock on the Park and Planning website showed there were 968,000 persons living in the county as of March 1 of this year.
- There are currently around 360,000 dwelling units in the county. And, according to the Research and Technology Center, another 75,000 dwelling units could be built under the zoning now assigned to properties in the county. Actually, the number could be as much as 10,000 units higher, since county law currently permits zoning density to be exceeded to accommodate required affordable housing units.
- 75,000 dwelling units would house almost 200,000 more persons, at the current average of 2.6 persons per household.
- Allowing even more development in Metro station areas will not prevent sprawl, since it cannot be substituted for zoning that already permits townhouse projects and subdivisions of clustered homes in rural areas. If increased density is approved in transit centers in the name of "smart growth," it will be in addition to the 75,000 dwelling units already zoned for throughout the county.
- We should not be so egotistical as to think that by increasing allowed development in Montgomery County that we will prevent sprawl from occurring in neighboring counties. Those counties are not approaching optimum scale as we are, and they are spending huge amounts of money to attract new jobs and residents.
- There are 600 classroom trailers in school yards throughout the Montgomery County. That is the equivalent of needing 24 new schools, at an average 25 classrooms per school.
- The latest Highway Mobility Report studied 80% of county intersections with signal lights, and found that 1 of every 6 are in failure with more traffic than they can handle in weekday morning and evening rush hours.
- County forest cover decreased from 45% in 1973 to 28% in 2000. Mature trees are the lungs for the region, which saw a 13.4% spike in carbon dioxide levels from 2001 to 2005. Coupled with increasing amounts of impervious surface from development, loss of tree canopy poses a threat to stream quality in the county's 246 watershed areas.

### **Let your voice be heard**

We all lead busy lives. But a truly representative democracy requires that we find time to let our leaders know how we feel on issues. You can help shape the future of the county for our children and for the natural environment by voicing your opinions at the May 5 Growth Forum and at the Council's upcoming public hearing. Or you can stay silent. Either way, you will be influencing the outcome.