

"Federation Corner" column
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Master planning for failure

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One of the first discussions Royce Hanson had with the County Council, following his 2006 appointment as Planning Board Chairman, concerned the pace of new development and traffic congestion. Hanson said that he wasn't sure there was much we could do to reduce traffic congestion in Montgomery County, but we could certainly try to make sure that it doesn't get much worse.

The revisions being proposed to area master plans, however, show little effort toward preventing worse traffic congestion. This is because for decades every master plan revision has recommended significant upzoning, which is the term for rezoning of properties that adds to the number of dwelling units and amount of office and retail space permitted by the current plan.

The first master plan revisions to be drafted by the Planning Board and sent to this Council for their approval are for communities along the MD 355/I-270 corridor. We strongly suggest each master plan revision include data on amount of housing and commercial space existing in the area, the amount in the "pipeline" approved but unbuilt, how much more could be built under current zoning, and how much would be added by the revision. By including these numbers, residents and Council members can better assess the impact of the proposed changes.

Plans for Twinbrook and White Flint

The draft version of the Twinbrook Sector Plan revision ("sector plan" refers to a master plan for a small area, such as the area surrounding a Metro station, within a larger planning area) includes potential for 5,380 more dwelling units and 4.9 million square feet more of office and retail space--added to the existing 4 million square feet of commercial space--to be built in the area outside Rockville City limits. The City of Rockville controls zoning for the portion of Twinbrook within its borders. The County Council is currently considering this revision, with action expected by November 23.

The draft revision of the White Flint Sector Plan would allow 12,000 more dwelling units to be built in the area than the 2,259 currently there, and allow a total of almost 13 million square feet of office and retail space. There are currently 5.5 million square feet of commercial space with another 1.79 million square feet approved but unbuilt.

The disconnect here is that the increased density for White Flint is being considered at the same time county officials express concern over whether the roads and transit infrastructure can handle 2,200 jobs being transferred from Walter Reed to the National Naval Medical Center site located just two miles to the south along Rockville Pike.

Plans for Germantown and Gaithersburg West

The draft Germantown Master Plan revision proposes rezoning that would allow for an additional 7,900 dwelling units and enough new retail and office space to generate 39,500 new jobs.

Preliminary proposals for revision of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan call for an additional 10,000 dwelling units, and 10 million square feet of new office and laboratory space, plus 300,000 square feet of new retail space. This revision focuses on an area west of I-270 where the Life Sciences Center is located and Johns Hopkins is planning to build on the former Belward Farm.

How wise is it to allow increased development in Gaithersburg West and Germantown since the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT), the mass transit system designed to serve these areas, isn't likely to be completed until 2020? (On September 10, Governor O'Malley eliminated state funding for the engineering phase of the CCT through at least fiscal year 2014.) Already the Clarksburg master plan provides zoning for up to 15,000 new dwelling units, most of which are built or in new subdivisions that have received Planning Board approval. Thousands of Clarksburg newcomers living in recently built homes are finding the shopping and employment opportunities promised in their master plan have not been provided, forcing them onto the road in their private vehicles to reach retail and jobs not yet available in their community. There has not even been a decision on the mode of transit or route for the CCT, although approval of growth in Clarksburg was to have been tied to construction of this mass transit system.

Is continually approving greater density of development without providing adequate mass transit a reasonable strategy to prevent traffic congestion from getting worse?

Facts on the ground

Many who support adding density near Metro stations claim it is "smart growth" aimed at preventing sprawl development into rural areas and neighboring counties. But, as the late Council member Marilyn Praisner stated during the growth policy debate last year, we should not be so egotistical as to think that Montgomery County can prevent sprawl into adjacent counties since they are spending energy and money to attract new jobs and housing. And, sprawl into our rural areas is already allowed by those master plans, with hundreds of new homes approved over the past two years to be built in our Agricultural Reserve and rural areas--all permitted under existing zoning.

How smart is allowing increased density, even if focused around Metro stations? There are 360,000 dwelling units in Montgomery County and nearly a million residents. And, between 75,000 and 85,000 more dwelling units could be built under existing zoning, including 10,000 or so affordably priced units--enough to accommodate another 200,000 more people. According to 2005 census data, only 30% of households in the region within a 1/2 mile of a Metro station use mass transit for their regular commuting needs, including walking and biking. That figure drops to 15%, at a distance between 1/2 and one mile from stations. Even if the numbers grew to 50% transit usage, the increased housing being planned for communities along the MD 355/I-270 corridor would throw some 17,000 more vehicles onto the roads. Is this a reasonable strategy to prevent traffic congestion from getting worse?

The 2008 Highway Mobility Report shows 1 in 7 signalized intersections in the county are failing, with more traffic than they can handle in morning or evening rush hours. It is closer to 1 in 6 since the Report uses traffic counts no more than 3 years old, meaning some failed intersections are not included. The county has an infrastructure deficit, with new roads, transit and schools needed to support development in place. There is a backlog for maintenance or replacement of existing infrastructure that will take years to address. And county government faces a structural deficit of hundreds of millions of dollars a year for the next several years.

It would be wise to investigate a way to revise master plans to improve our communities without increasing the allowed density or we will be master planning for failure.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com