

"Federation Corner" column
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On the need to act greener

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At the dawn of this new century, Montgomery County is poised on the verge of a full-blown green revolution. Concern over environmental degradation on both a global and local level has led to greater efforts to recycle, insistence on new green building standards, and tougher county storm water management standards imposed by the State, to name a few changes. All of us--individuals, corporations and governments--are being asked to "think green" by looking at the full range of activities we engage in and considering their impact on the environment.

At his request, Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson briefed attendees at the December 2008 MCCF meeting on his draft proposals to alter the county Growth Policy. He explained that one of the tradeoffs for allowing greater density of development near Metro stations, and in many other locations, should be a reversal of the damage already done to the natural environment in those areas. And Dr. Hanson detailed specific examples of the kind of environmental improvements to which he referred.

Large areas with a high percentage of impervious surfaces where rainfall can no longer soak down into the ground, "megablocks" as the Chairman called them, could be broken up and new green spaces provided. Tree canopy coverage in urbanized areas could be increased, to help clean the air and offset the heat island effect caused by buildings and paved surfaces warming in the sun and raising local air temperature. And ways could be found to reduce pollutants and sediment in storm water runoff, in order to improve stream quality.

There is a huge difference between thinking and talking green, however, and acting in an environmentally responsible manner. While the county Planning Department and Board are currently discussing ways to improve the natural environment of the county, their actions at times contradict the goals they claim to endorse.

In the recent past, the Planning Board voted to recommend that the County Council approve the rezoning of two sites in Bethesda for building projects, in a zone which requires that half of the land be provided as green area. But, in one of the projects more than half of the required green area would be located on the roof of the building, while most would be located on the roof in the other.

Green roofs can hold rainfall and allow slow evaporation back into the atmosphere, but they do not have the same environmental benefit as an area of undeveloped ground into which rainfall can be absorbed. When enough storm water is prevented from filtering into the earth in an area, it can result in insufficient groundwater to feed local springs. Continuous flow streams can become intermittent, and intermittent streams can dry up altogether.

The Board endorsement of the two Bethesda projects which violate the intent of the green area requirement, then, seems to contradict the reversal of environmental damage that Chairman Hanson says should occur in exchange for allowing higher density development in such an urbanized area.

Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley is advocating another such contradictory project for Silver Spring, where redevelopment of the north parcel of the Falklands garden apartment complex

would result in loss of a significant tree canopy by clear cutting of the site, and forcing of the stream on the property into an underground pipe. And the footprint of the proposed building would all but fill the site, while the current layout of garden apartments leaves a substantial percentage of undisturbed land.

There is a movement in some communities across the country to daylight streams--that is, to relocate streams to the surface which had previously been redirected into underground culverts, and to provide landscaped swaths of land adjacent on either side. Businesses in these communities have received an unanticipated economic benefit in the form of increased sales to those visiting the area or purchasing food for picnics near the newly daylighted streams.

In addition, land use planners, historic preservationists and environmental advocates nationwide agree that the greenest building is the one that already exists. Adaptive re-use of existing structures reduces our carbon footprint (a new, "green" term) by preventing expenditure of fuel for demolition and removal of rubble to a landfill, and the transportation of building materials to the site for new construction. Why, then, is our county Planning Director pushing Silver Spring in the opposite direction by endorsing replacement of the garden apartments and forested area and stream on the Falklands north parcel with an enormous new high-rise building?

Another example in which a Planning Department proposal for action contradicts their stated goals for environmental improvement is the revision of the master plan for the area around the White Flint Metro station, which is currently underway. The Department recommends increasing the amount of housing in the area by some 13,000 dwelling units, and allowing enough new office and retail space to create some 26,000 new jobs.

The revision of the White Flint Sector Plan would seem to be an ideal opportunity to put Chairman Hanson's idea of increased density balanced by environmental improvements into practice. But the draft plan calls for maintaining the current 72% amount of impervious land cover in the area, and notes that "stream degradation will continue, but at a decreasing rate." In their defense, staff does recommend increasing the tree canopy in the area from the current 10.5% to 30%, but includes few details on how this should be done other than by planting more roadside trees.

The push by our top land planners to allow higher density of development in multiple areas of the county based on a promise of accompanying environmental improvements should be viewed with great skepticism. Until their actions demonstrate they intend to keep their promise, this deal should be considered a meaningless sales pitch. Our officials don't just need to talk green. They need to act greener, too, in every decision they make.

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