

"Federation Corner" column
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Introducing DENSIMAX

by Jim Humphrey
Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

We have all seen the ads on television for new pharmaceutical products with catchy names which the drug companies try to persuade us we need. The ads show happy people, posed with other actors pretending to be their spouses or friends, engaged in recreational activities like boating, jogging or flying a kite on a beach. The unspoken message is that if you will only use the drug being advertised you too will be physically active, and spend your life surrounded by loved ones and engaged in leisurely pursuits. Then, at the end of the ad, an unseen announcer quickly runs through a list of horrific possible side effects of using the new wonder drug.

The current leadership of the Park and Planning Commission is marketing greater density of development to the residents and government officials in Montgomery County in just as slick a manner as that used in televised drug ads. The marketing representatives in this case are Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley and Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson. They are traveling the county and talking to community groups, government officials, and building industry representatives making a pitch for greatly increased growth which rivals any sales campaign from the pharmaceutical industry. They call their product "Growing Smarter Montgomery," but I think it deserves a more accurate name such as DENSIMAX.

"Are you tired of sitting in traffic back-ups, commuting to your job? Do you long for life in a transit-oriented, smart growth neighborhood with green buildings, reduced carbon footprint, less impervious surface coverage, and pedestrian activated street life? Don't you want to live in an environmentally friendly, tree filled community where everyone knows their neighbors, shopping and employment are right around the corner, and everyone is physically fit from walking and biking? Ask your doctor if DENSIMAX is right for you."

The prescribing doctors, in this case, are the County Councilmembers who approve all revisions of community master plans, revisions which invariably upzone properties to increase the density--or the number of housing units and square footage of retail/office space--allowed in new development. And County Executive Leggett is involved in the deal, too, since he must sign off on all master plan revisions before they are sent to the Council.

This Council seems to have bought into the idea that the county needs to be on DENSIMAX, because they are racing to apply it in a record number of communities. The last Council with its pro-development majority only approved the revised master plans for 4 areas: Olney; Shady Grove; Damascus; and, Bethesda. That was 4 master plans in 4 years, or an average of 1 per year. While not approving any new master plans in its first two years in office, this Council intends to consider the revision of 6 plans in only twenty-two months: Twinbrook; Germantown; Gaithersburg West (aka 'Science City'); White Flint; Kensington; and, the Takoma/Langley Crossroads (the area around the intersection of University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue).

The drug companies in this scenario are the developers who make increased profits from constructing bigger development projects, allowed by the upzoning in master plan revisions. But what do the doctors...er, the Councilmembers and County Executive stand to get out of the deal? For one thing, they have been promised by the marketing reps, planners Stanley and Hanson, that increased density of development will provide the additional revenue needed to get the county

government out of the current fiscal mess it faces...and the denser the development allowed in master plans, the greater the possible revenue profit. (Although, truth be told, enhanced revenue from growth has never resulted in a net revenue increase in the past since it all goes to build and maintain the new infrastructure needed to support the additional development.) And one must not forget that there is an unspoken arrangement that elected officials who play along by "prescribing" DENSIMAX for their constituents will likely receive campaign contributions from the development industry in the next election.

How about those horrific possible side effects from use of DENSIMAX? We're not hearing about them, even in a rushed list at the end of the Stanley-Hanson marketing pitch. I can only imagine the product information flyer the FDA would require to be included in boxes of DENSIMAX if it were a regulated drug.

"DENSIMAX may not be appropriate for use in the most densely populated county in the fifth most densely populated state in the country (Montgomery County), or in suburban counties where the population density on the developed land area exceeds 3,000 persons per square mile (Montgomery County). Officials should think twice about applying DENSIMAX where 1 in 6 signalized intersections are over capacity in morning or afternoon rush hours (Montgomery County), or in supposedly transit-oriented communities that currently lack adequate mass transit facilities (Germantown, Gaithersburg West, Clarksburg, Takoma/Langley). In areas where mild to severe levels of traffic congestion are present in spite of the existence of mass transit, use of DENSIMAX may result in complete arterial blockage (White Flint).

"Communities using DENSIMAX may experience significant loss of locally-owned small businesses. Cut-through traffic, spillover parking and increased crime rates have been known to destroy the peace and quiet of older neighborhoods adjacent to areas where DENSIMAX is used. Caution should be used in applying DENSIMAX to areas that already exhibit a profusion of classroom trailers in school yards, as this condition may worsen. In severe cases, use of DENSIMAX has resulted in the death of local streams and the disappearance of most non-human life forms from the area. You should stop using DENSIMAX if you experience inadequate infrastructure--schools, roads, transit and public safety services--lasting more than 3 or 4 years."

But, wait, once officials have prescribed DENSIMAX to areas of the county there is no going back, no reducing the density of development allowed on properties without risking the government being sued by developers over loss of property rights. The wisest course for our officials is to think long and hard about the possible risks and costs of growth, and not just the purported benefits, before allowing it to occur.

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