

"Federation Corner" column
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A primer on county growth

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This fall, as they do every two years in the odd-numbered years, the County Council will consider changes to the county growth policy. For more than thirty years, the growth policy has been the tool used to tie Planning Board approval of new development projects to the ability of the county government to insure that infrastructure--schools, road and transit capacity, and public safety services--will be in place to support the new housing as well as the new jobs created in commercial space in those projects.

A claim often made by pro-growth government officials is that the county is "nearing buildout." On its face, the statement appears to mean that little more development can take place before building will come to a halt in the near future. But once you understand the meaning of the term "buildout," you realize that nothing could be further from the truth.

The term "buildout" is defined as the point when every property has been fully developed to the maximum density allowed by its zoning. There are two key reasons for uncertainty as to when buildout will occur. First, the owners of some properties, which are developed at less density than allowed, have no immediate plans to redevelop those properties to their buildout potential. And, secondly, the density allowed on properties (that is, the number of dwelling units or square footage of commercial space per acre) is being increased on an ongoing basis, either in master plan revisions that recommend increased density through upzoning or through amendments to the zoning ordinance.

For decades, the master plans for the various communities in the county have been revised in succession to recommend upzoning of a significant portion of properties in each area, with the cycle restarting when completed. Increases in density are also approved by the County Council through the Zoning Text Amendment (ZTA) process. For example, a ZTA might increase the allowed height or mass of buildings in a zone above previous standards, thereby increasing the permitted density of development.

Every time an area master plan is revised and properties are upzoned, or the standards of a zone category are changed to allow greater density of development, the buildout of the county is pushed further into the future. And the eventual scale of the county grows larger, too, with the additional housing units, population, and number of jobs allowed by changes the Council enacts.

The current County Council has already approved the revision of one master plan for the Twinbrook area, and intends to consider revision of five more area master plans in the upcoming year. Revisions are underway to the master plans for Germantown, Gaithersburg West (aka "Science City"), White Flint, Kensington and the Takoma/Langley Crossroads (the intersection of University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue).

Montgomery is the most densely populated county in the fifth most densely populated state in the union. Enough new housing could be built under existing zoning to accommodate more than 200,000 additional population and create another 120,000 to 160,000 jobs. And if the five master plan revisions this Council intends to consider are approved as recommended by Planning Department staff, then an additional 31,000 housing units and 80,000 jobs could be created. Even

if the Corridor Cities Transitway were built and operating, and even if half those new households and employees in those new jobs use mass transit, walk or bike for their regular commuting, there will be tens of thousands of additional cars on the roads in the I-270/MD 355 corridor due to increased development approved by this Council.

Is there some goal, some desired benefit that officials are hoping to achieve from all of this proposed growth? And is anyone researching an appropriate "optimum scale" for the county?

The "optimum scale" for a community is defined as a population size and level of economic activity that is sustainable for a very long time, at levels of per capita resource use that permit a good life for all. One could debate how to define "a very long time," but it is generally agreed that a sustainable community should provide healthy economic activity and a good quality of life for current residents which does not negatively impact the ability of their children and grandchildren to achieve the same.

When he addressed the MCCF last December on the issue of growth, Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson was asked whether anyone on the Board or Department staff was considering an appropriate optimum scale for the county. He replied that he didn't think there was one. Well, if the Department staff and Board members have no overall growth goal in mind then, as I've said before, they are essentially throwing darts at a blank wall and telling everyone they're hitting the target. And if planning officials are fixed on continually increasing levels of growth, then the growth policy is the only thing that residents can rely on to prevent ever-worsening traffic congestion, school overcrowding, ongoing degradation of the natural environment, and a persistent decline in quality of life.

This year, however, Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley is urging the overthrow of growth policy basics that have been refined over decades, asserting that it doesn't matter how much development is allowed, or at what pace, so long as it is focused in transit-oriented areas. And Stanley is scheming to give additional density and other bonuses to developers as an incentive to build in these areas. One problem with this approach is that a hefty portion of the allowed density in the county is located in outlying areas which are considered sprawl locations. If the increased density Stanley is proposing for transit centers is not offset by a decrease in more rural areas, then we will have hyperdensified transit centers in addition to sprawl development, not instead of it.

A fair number of residents will need to contact Council members about the growth policy this fall, to steer them from the ill-advised, impractical path our so-called expert planners are luring them down.

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 theelms518@earthlink.net