

"Federation Corner" column
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Is urbanizing of Germantown being rushed?

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

Fifty years ago or so, when I was a kid, Germantown was a tiny crossroads town with a few stores serving the surrounding agricultural community. After my father's best friend, an army buddy, was hired to work in the new Atomic Energy Commission building in Germantown, my parents, my sister and I, and the family dog all piled into our station wagon and took a trip into the countryside to see this new facility, a symbol of national and local emergence into the nuclear age. Our dog had the best time on that excursion, as he relished car trips during which he could bark at cows grazing in the fields we passed, something the area had in great numbers back then.

Germantown has grown into a community with over 6,000 housing units and nearly 14 million square feet of retail and office space that generates over 23,000 jobs. And the fields of grazing cows, like my family's dog, are no longer with us.

Over the past year, the Planning Board considered a revision of the Germantown master plan, which was last updated in 1989. The Board approved revision was sent to the County Council for consideration earlier this year, and in May the Council held a public hearing. The revised plan would allow 9,000 more housing units and another 9 million square feet of commercial development to be built in Germantown, enough to generate 46,670 more jobs.

When the Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee held a worksession on the proposed plan revision this past Monday, Council member Nancy Floreen reminded attendees that she had served on the Planning Board that approved the 1989 Germantown plan. Although the housing envisioned in that plan has been built, the 1989 plan would still permit 36,000 new jobs to be created in 6 million square feet more commercial development than currently exists in Germantown, 3.4 million square feet of which is already approved but unbuilt. Why, Ms. Floreen wondered, have the retail and office space and jobs not been created which were planned for Germantown twenty years ago? No one from the Planning Department staff or Planning Board had an answer.

Master plans have a relatively short "shelf life" of 15 to 20 years before conditions on the ground change sufficiently to trigger a revision. Now Germantown is poised to become a much more densely developed area with this newly revised plan that is predicated on the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) serving the area. The new plan recommends two additional CCT stations be constructed in the area than were originally planned for the mass transit system, and an added alignment east of I-270 in addition to the planned western alignment.

Denser development is being proposed for Germantown because it will be a transit oriented community once the CCT is built, so the increase is considered "smart growth." But how smart is it to allow 9,000 more houses and 46,000 more jobs to be created in Germantown when the Planning Department staff freely admits that the CCT will not be built to serve this area for another 20 years? Isn't the Council on the verge of repeating the mistake of Clarksburg in allowing the build out of another transit dependent community to occur without insuring the transit will be in place to accommodate the added density? Without the CCT available to it, the new "smart growth" levels of development in Germantown will throw tens of thousands of more vehicles onto I-270 and local roads in morning and afternoon rush hours.

On June 8, the Planning Board received the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) classroom capacity projections for the school year starting in September 2013, showing the Seneca Valley High School cluster will exceed 120% of classroom capacity on the elementary school level. This is due in part to the fact that Waters Landing Elementary School will reduce its student-teacher ratio to 18:1 starting next year. Under the growth policy, any school cluster projected to exceed 120% of capacity on the high school, middle or elementary school level four years in the future is placed in moratorium, and no more development projects can be approved in the area. The Planning Board agreed to place the Seneca Valley cluster in moratorium until additional elementary classrooms can be constructed, probably on an MCPS property on Waring Station Road across from Roberto Clemente Middle School, a site now rented to the Peppertree Children's Center.

There are bleak economic years ahead, and the county government is already estimating a \$370 million budget shortfall in the fiscal year beginning July 2010 and a \$400 million shortfall for the year following. How likely is it that there will be funding to construct a new elementary school in the Seneca Valley cluster in the near future, since the state is in no better fiscal shape than our county? And how likely is it that there will be local, state or Federal funding in the next 20 years to build the CCT?

Planning the buildup of Germantown at this time seems akin to a homeowner inviting the in-laws to come for an extended visit, and planning to put them up in a large new home addition he proposes to construct, while at the same time he has just lost his job. The County Council is considering allowing the development industry to build bigger and more profitable development projects in Germantown, while county government will be responsible for insuring there are adequate roads, transit, schools and other services to accommodate the allowed growth. Perhaps it is too soon to be revising the Germantown master plan, especially since the current plan will allow significant commercial and economic growth to occur in the area.

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