

"Federation Corner" column  
The Montgomery Sentinel - July 9, 2009

### **A national model of poor planning**

by Jim Humphrey  
Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

It seems to me that officials in Montgomery County are just a little too fond of asserting some government program or other could or does serve "as a national model." It is an assertion which is reminiscent of the claim made by Garrison Keillor on his radio show A Prairie Home Companion that all of the children residing in the fictional community of Lake Wobegon are above average...a nice thought, but a bit too prideful and almost certainly not accurate.

It is true that Montgomery County's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit program, begun over 30 years ago, has been copied in other areas across the country. The program requires a percentage of units in all new residential projects be affordable for renters or purchasers earning up to 60% of median income. Still, for the last six years the Civic Federation has tried to assure all required housing units are actually provided, by seeking elimination of a provision in law that allows developers to buy their way out of the requirement. The MPDU program is still not quite the national model that county officials proclaim it to be.

It is also true that the effort to preserve land in upper Montgomery County for agricultural use has been studied by other communities. The 25 year old program allows land owners in the Agricultural Reserve to sell the development rights to build homes on their land to a developer who can transfer the density and build additional housing in a designated receiving area. But, every year the Planning Board still approves the construction of new single homes and small subdivisions in the AgReserve. And the horse industry and landscape nurseries are the primary uses in this area, while there is little effort to encourage food production on this land so close to a major population center, an effort which would lower our carbon footprint by reducing fuel used to transport produce from further away. So, the Agricultural Reserve program is still not quite the national model that our officials proclaim it to be.

Documents released this week by the Planning Department, pertaining to the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT), do demonstrate that Montgomery County can serve as an effective national model--a model of how not to do long range transit planning.

For the past four decades or so, the master plans for communities along the I-270 corridor have called for construction of the CCT as a light rail line which would connect Clarksburg, Germantown, and West Gaithersburg to the Metro subway Red Line terminus at the Shady Grove Station. In fact, the master plans for Germantown and West Gaithersburg are currently undergoing revision to greatly increase the allowed density of development in these communities because the CCT is so close to becoming a reality. Yep, planners predict it could be as little as 20 years before the CCT is built and in use to Germantown. Sorry, Clarksburg, you'll have to wait a bit longer.

The plans, however, have always called for an Operations and Maintenance facility for the CCT to be located near the COMSAT building in Clarksburg, site of a future CCT station. But just this week, in one of those documents I mentioned, the Planning Department's transportation staff realized that construction for the CCT would begin at the Shady Grove Station and proceed northward to reach Clarksburg in the final leg of construction. So our planners are now thinking that perhaps a better location for the O&M facility for the CCT (we do love our acronyms in Montgomery) would be on a site nearer to the Shady Grove Metro station. The only problem is that County Executive Ike Leggett has been scrambling to relocate government facilities from the County Services Park near that Metro station

to free up the site for high density commercial and residential development near the transit center, a scheme which originated in the Planning Department's 2005 revision of the Shady Grove master plan.

But, wait, an idea has been recently floated to build the CCT as a Bus Rapid Transit system (or BRT...again with the acronyms). If the CCT is a BRT then its O&M could still be built in the Clarksburg area, since a dedicated bus lane system could be built all the way to Clarksburg in a relatively short period of time. And, coincidentally, for years the county government has been planning to build a North County Bus Maintenance Depot on a site next to the Clarksburg jail, a facility that is needed for there to be any expansion of the RideOn system in the northern part of the county since we've run out of space to park new buses.

Maybe a BRT CCT could share this planned bus storage and maintenance depot. The problem with this idea is that, in another document released this week, Planning staff apparently just realized that the site near the jail might not be the best location for a huge bus parking lot and repair shop since the land is in an environmental special protection area with a 15% limit on the amount of impervious, or paved, surface allowed. Staff is only now recommending that another site be found for the bus depot, or a study be done of how to use the current proposed site by employing "best management practices" to prevent damage to this sensitive watershed area, at an in-house cost of \$600,000 and an additional \$400,000 for an outside consultant to help with alternative site selection.

To complete this picture of planning ineptitude, I share one additional new recommendation from Planning Department staff to "establish a working group to examine methods of accelerating the funding and implementation of the CCT..." Why rush, fellas? You've only had 40 years to plan for the CCT.

I think Montgomery County officials have earned the right to claim that this fiasco should serve "as a national model" for how not to do transit planning.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*