

"Federation Corner" column
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Planning for more school overcrowding

Or, the "Son of Clarksburg" meets Groucho Marx

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

If this Federation Corner column was a movie it might be called "Clarksburg 2" or "Son of Clarksburg." The name of the northern Montgomery County town has become inextricably linked with the 2005 revelation that developers in Clarksburg and elsewhere in the county were constructing projects that violated the conditions of their approved building plans. It seems the Planning Department had been carefully drafting requirements for new development projects which the Planning Board then imposed. But nobody was checking to see if the requirements were being met.

Well, four years have passed since the Clarksburg scandal, so by my watch it's time for another planning debacle. And sure enough, one is brewing. This one involves the county growth policy and a scheme the Planning Department has concocted to worsen school overcrowding.

The growth policy is considered for revision by the County Council every two years in odd numbered years. It used to be called the Annual Growth Policy. But, as a former Council member used to say, it wasn't annual, it didn't regulate growth, and it wasn't much of a policy.

The intent of the growth policy is simple: to enforce the county law which requires the Planning Board, before it approves the construction of new homes or retail and office buildings, to find there will be adequate "roads and transportation facilities, sewerage and water services, schools, police stations, firehouses, and health clinics" to service the area of the proposed projects. This law was enacted in 1973 and is appropriately called the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance.

Up until 2003 the growth policy scheme was working pretty well. For the prior eight years under former County Executive Doug Duncan's administration, the government had been collecting money from developers to help pay for new infrastructure needed to accommodate growth, but was not building the needed infrastructure. Schools were getting more overcrowded. Roads were becoming more congested. Transit service was severely inadequate. Yep, things were just peachy. And then the five members of the County Council who were elected as part of the laughably named "End Gridlock" slate, endorsed by Duncan, decided to really muck things up by gutting the growth policy.

It's always darkest right before some damned fool figures out how to make things worse. In November of 2003 the End Gridlockers, whose campaigns had received significant cash contributions from the development industry, voted to weaken the test for roads and schools, and eliminated the process that had been used to regulate the pace of new development.

As comedian Groucho Marx used to say, "Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies." And to no one's surprise, by early 2007 traffic congestion was worse than ever and there were 719 classroom trailers in county school yards, euphemistically referred to as "learning cottages," because school construction had not kept up with the increasing number of students.

In November 2007 the current County Council, with the three reelected "End Gridlock" members now in the minority, turned things around by approving new and tougher schools, roads, and transit adequacy tests that must be met before new development projects can be approved. They also increased the

amount of money collected from developers, and dedicated the funds to pay for new infrastructure. And in two years the number of classroom trailers in school yards has been cut in half.

Also in 2007, to their credit, the current Council set a maximum allowable level for school overcrowding at 120% of capacity and required a temporary halt in approval of new housing projects in any school cluster that exceeds that level. Evidence that the new process is working came on July 1 of this year when the Seneca Valley and B-CC clusters joined Clarksburg in having a temporary halt imposed on approval of new residential development, due to elementary school overcrowding.

The development industry oligarchy in the county immediately began plotting to break this moratorium, which they publicized as a stain on the county's national reputation that will harm our ability to attract new businesses. Gee, and here I thought the halt in new approvals would send a strong positive message to companies that, should they locate to Montgomery, this county is firmly committed to providing their employees' children with adequate school facilities. For some unknown reason, the Planning Department headed by Canadian Rollin Stanley is now proposing a scheme that would allow any projects which developers have been planning for up to a year before the moratorium took effect to still come forward for Planning Board approval. To hell with how crowded classrooms become!

Of course, had county planners been doing a better job then the county would have sufficient classroom capacity to accommodate the rising student population and no moratorium would be needed. Instead, the Planning Department has chosen to recommend the Council enact an amendment to the growth policy that would allow the Planning Board to violate county law--the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance--by approving development in communities where it knows the schools are inadequate.

Well, as the late political pundit Will Rogers once asked, "If stupidity got us into this mess, then why can't it get us out?"

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