

"Federation Corner" column
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Good government doesn't mean a bad reputation

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

Each June, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) submits to the Planning Board a set of student enrollment and school capacity projections for five years in the future, broken down by elementary, middle and high school level for each school cluster in the county. If any cluster is predicted to have an enrollment exceeding 120% of capacity on any grade level then, according to the county growth policy, the Planning Board must not approve any more residential development projects in that area until more classroom capacity is provided--and not those trailers either, but brick-and-mortar classrooms.

This year MCPS submitted data to the Planning Board for the school year beginning September 2014, and the Seneca Valley and Bethesda-Chevy Chase clusters were both projected to exceed 120% of capacity on the elementary level. So starting July 1, the Board imposed a temporary halt on approval of new housing projects in both cluster areas. They joined the Clarksburg area, which was already in moratorium for new residential project approvals due to insufficient middle school capacity.

This turn of events seemed to those of us in the civic community to be a sign of a well-functioning county government which was enforcing its Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, a law enacted in 1973 that requires the Planning Board to find there is adequate roads, transit and school capacity to serve a new development before approving the project.

The county growth policy is reexamined every two years, in odd-numbered years. And on June 22 the Planning Board held a public hearing on proposed changes to the growth policy being recommended by the Planning Department staff. It was at this hearing that I first heard a phrase that was new to me.

A land use lawyer who represents development industry clients stated the moratorium would "damage Montgomery County's national reputation" as a place that is friendly to business, and restrain the ability of the county government to attract new companies to locate here. This seemed to me to be an odd claim, since the moratorium in the Clarksburg, Seneca Valley and Bethesda-Chevy Chase school cluster areas only prevents approval of new residential projects. Commercial projects containing office and retail space can still be approved and built. And residential projects that have already received approval can also still be built.

A week or so later, I heard a high-ranking county official assert that a way must be found to lift the moratorium, as it will "damage the national reputation of the county" and impact the government's ability to attract new business to Montgomery County. Again, this seemed to me to be an odd claim, since I thought businesses might view the moratorium favorably as a firm commitment on the part of the county to providing adequate school facilities to their employees' children, should the companies move here.

Then, just last week I had a conversation with a realtor who handles single-unit home sales in my neighborhood, not commercial properties or undeveloped acreage. And I asked what they thought of the moratorium on new residential project approvals that now affects three of the twenty-five school clusters in the county. Again I heard the now familiar claim that "it will damage the county's national reputation" as a place that is welcoming of new businesses. I wondered how a temporary halt in approval of new residential projects, which affects a total land area less than one-eighth of the county in size, could possibly be a deal breaker for companies looking to locate here.

There are commercial development projects located throughout the county that are already approved but unbuilt, totaling four million square feet of space. Any company looking to move here has a long list of options to choose from--location, building size, price, and even the developer--all for approved projects ready to be built. The only thing I could see which might prevent businesses from locating here is, in fact, the county's national reputation.

If companies are thinking of locating to Montgomery County, the government will guarantee their employees' property taxes will increase ten percent each year, doubling every eight-and-a-half years.

The county is home to some of the worst traffic congestion in the nation which, coupled with inadequate public transit and ever increasing levels of planned growth, is guaranteed to get worse with each passing year.

Montgomery County has one of the widest income disparities in the U.S. At the same time the county ranks near the highest per capita income nationally, 25.8% of our public school students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches based on low household income.

And Montgomery can boast of poor water quality in several stream watersheds, with perhaps the most serious offense requiring signs posted along Rock Creek near the Gude Landfill cautioning children and pets not to wade in the polluted water.

But the county getting a bad reputation for strict enforcement of a law requiring there be adequate school capacity to accommodate new housing projects before they can be approved...I just don't see it.

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