

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Why growth sounds scary to county residents**

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, Planning and Land Use Committee

The County Council will hold a public hearing on the county growth policy on the evening of September 22. As has been stated repeatedly in this column, county law requires that by November 15 in odd-numbered years the Council must adopt a growth policy for the upcoming two years.

And, as has also been repeated in this column, the master plans for the various areas of the county establish what kind of development can occur on each property in an area as well as the amount of development--the number of housing units or the amount of commercial space. The growth policy is the mechanism that governs the pace of Planning Board approval of that planned new development, matching the rate of growth to the ability of the county government to provide supportive infrastructure to accommodate the growth. By setting the pace for new development approvals, the growth policy implements or enforces the county's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO). That law, enacted in 1973, reads:

*"The Planning Board must not approve a preliminary Plan of subdivision unless the Board finds that public facilities will be adequate to support and service the area of the proposed subdivision. Public facilities and services to be examined for adequacy include roads and public transportation facilities, sewerage and water service, schools, police stations, firehouses, and health clinics."*

So why does the prospect of growth sound so scary to so many county residents? My guess as to the answer to that question is that the levels of adequacy of the various public facilities and services which are mentioned in the APFO have a direct bearing on the quality of life of residents. And bear in mind the APFO only mentions critical core facilities and services necessary to public health, safety and welfare. So the growth policy does not attempt to assess the adequacy of other public services and facilities that also contribute to quality of life, such as libraries, parks, and recreation centers.

But even looking at the adequacy of core facilities and services which the APFO inherently promises to residents, we're not doing so well. Five years ago, there were a total of 719 classroom trailers, euphemistically referred to as "learning cottages," in school yards around the county. To their credit, Montgomery County Public Schools reduced that number to 424 by last year. But, this school year they are headed in the opposite direction, increasing the number of trailer classrooms by 3%. And if your child is one who is being educated in one of these trailers, which can harbor mold and have no running water, it is a quality of life issue that your kid has to put on a coat and trudge into the brick-and-mortar school next door in winter just to use the restroom.

Montgomery County has 759 intersections with signal lights. And about 1 in 6 of these intersections has more traffic in morning and evening weekday rush hours than it can handle. One of the tricks used to make it seem that intersections are not so overburdened, especially in highly congested urbanized areas, is to increase the allowed capacity. This doesn't make traffic any less congested; it simply allows more development projects in the area to be approved because traffic levels haven't exceeded the new, more lax standard. But you and I know traffic congestion is getting worse because we're sitting in the backups every day.

As to transit, the transportation planners in the Planning Department have calculated that the best transit service in the county exists in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area, where the average commute by transit takes 137% of the time of the average commute by car. The worst transit service in the county

exists in the Damascus area, where the average transit commute time is nearly double the time for the average commute by car. Now there's an incentive to leave the car at home and take mass transit!

And, while the County Council is approving higher and higher density in the master plans for the county's Metro Station areas, is anybody calculating the carrying capacity of the Metrorail system? Do you think any member of the Council has ever boarded Metro in Bethesda during morning rush and tried to get a seat on an inbound Red Line train? It can't be done...and that, my friends, is a quality of life issue.

The zoning already in place on properties in the county will allow 75,000 more dwelling units to be built. That is enough housing to accommodate 195,000 additional residents, or 20% more than at present. And in the next 9 months the Council will consider increasing the allowed density of development in 5 master plans to permit in excess of 30,000 more dwelling units total in Germantown, White Flint, Gaithersburg West, Kensington and Langley Park--enough for 80,000 more residents.

Until 2003, each growth policy included ceilings on the amount of new homes and jobs that could be approved countywide over the ensuing two years. Unless the Council reinstates this pacing mechanism as part of this year's growth policy, then all of the growth allowed in master plans could come slamming at us as fast as the market demands and developers can build it. Maybe that's what makes residents so nervous when county government officials tell us "growth is inevitable...it's not how dense you make it, it's how you make it dense." We're not that dense...er, stupid.

*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)*