

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - September 10, 2009

County Executive silent on improving traffic test

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, Planning and Land Use Committee, Montgomery County Civic Federation

Two years ago, the County Council approved a new transportation test to identify areas of the county with unacceptably high levels of traffic congestion or insufficient transit service to handle commuter demand during weekday morning or evening rush hours. The test was named the Policy Area Mobility Review (PAMR). The idea behind the test is that the Planning Board could approve more building projects in areas found to have inadequate transportation capacity, but only if the developers of those projects made contributions toward improving the roads or transit systems in the area.

Admittedly, aspects of the PAMR test are difficult for the average citizen to understand, so difficult that one Councilmember commented she would need a PhD to explain it to her constituency. Those of us who opposed the elimination of the old transportation test by the previous Council in 2003 were pleased to see a new test approved. But there were some, including County Executive Ike Leggett, who thought the new test should not be approved without improvements first being made.

In a memo to Council dated October 27, 2007, Mr. Leggett stated "I am concerned that the Policy Area Mobility Review proposed by the Planning Board provides results that do not accurately reflect actual transportation capacity, is difficult to understand and thus is not transparent to County residents. We need an approach that is understandable, that will yield results that truly model the impact of proposed development on our transportation system, and that reflects actual transportation policies of the County."

In the October 2007 memo, County Executive Leggett continued by asking the Council not to adopt a model with questionable results, but rather "take an additional six to nine months to develop an effective, reliable, and readily understood broader policy area review that will yield the results that we seek--achieving balance between Master Plan land uses and supporting transportation infrastructure. We need a transportation test that stages development based on the County's adopted Master Plans."

County Executive Leggett went on to suggest a process for improving the proposed PAMR test. "My staff, the Planning Board and County Council staff have a wealth of knowledge, understanding and expertise on these matters. They should work together over the next six months on a model that successfully stages growth and collectively come back to the Council with a plan that we know will be successful."

The Council forged ahead and approved PAMR in November 2007, against the wishes of Mr. Leggett, but requested a study be conducted by the Planning Board with the aid of the County Executive to evaluate alternatives to PAMR as a policy area level transportation test. The study was to have considered alternative methods to calculate the key components of PAMR, relative arterial mobility (that is, adequacy of roads) and relative transit mobility (adequacy of transit), and was due to be submitted to the Council by August 1, 2008. The study was submitted to the Council by the Board, but to the best of my knowledge it contained no suggestions from the County Executive for improving PAMR or replacing it with any alternative test.

The Council is once again preparing to consider possible changes to the county growth policy, as they do every two years in odd-numbered years. And once again, County Executive Leggett is urging that an alternative transportation test to PAMR be formulated and adopted by Council. But neither he nor his staff members are offering any concrete suggestions as to what that alternative should be. And,

although the Council by law must adopt the growth policy for the upcoming two years prior to November 15, the County Executive's staff now claims they will be considering hiring a consultant to help develop an alternative to PAMR, and may have a suggestion to offer to Council in six to nine months.

One must ask why the County Executive has been so slow to weigh in on making improvements to a transportation test that two years ago he declared was not effective, reliable or easily understood, yet one which in the mean time is being applied to development approvals. And it's not as if Mr. Leggett fails to grasp that the residents of the county are concerned about increasing traffic congestion.

In his inaugural address, delivered in December 2006, Leggett stated that we had many problems to solve, and that unmonitored growth and traffic congestion continue to plague use. He noted, "The frustration of sitting in traffic is not anyone's idea of how they would like to spend their precious time." He continued, "There are going to be many decisions made—some that will be obvious and easy, and many that will be very difficult, some popular and some not so. But I assure you, during my tenure as County Executive, we will make the necessary decisions and they will be the right decisions for Montgomery County."

We need the assertive voice of the County Executive to weigh in on the growth policy, Mr. Leggett, and in a timely fashion prior to the November 15 deadline for Council action. Otherwise, the Council will make their decision without you.

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