

"Federation Corner" column
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County Executive comments on growth policy

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

This week's Federation Corner is a follow-up to the column published last week ("County Executive silent on plans to improve traffic tests," Montgomery Sentinel--September 10, 2009). In that column, I asked why County Executive Ike Leggett had been so slow to weigh in on making improvements to the transportation test approved by the County Council as part of the growth policy two years ago, since at that time he declared it was not effective, reliable or easily understood.

This past Tuesday, September 15, Mr. Leggett transmitted a memo to Council containing his comments on the new round of changes to the growth policy being proposed by the Planning Board, and in that memo he reiterates his concern about the transportation test adopted in 2007.

"A key concern that I raised two years ago is that the test for transportation capacity, 'Policy Area Mobility Review' or 'PAMR,' is fundamentally flawed," Leggett states in his September 15 memo. "Despite Planning Board review of PAMR, they did not recommend an alternative to PAMR."

"Montgomery County needs a Growth Policy that results in achieving balance in the timing of private development and public infrastructure to avoid failure of our transportation system, overburdening of schools or economic stagnation through moratoria," the County Executive continued. "The importance of a sound Growth Policy is even more compelling with the recent action of the Council removing staging from the Germantown Employment Center Sector Plan. If staging of development is not to be included in Master Plans, then the role of the Growth Policy remains a key mechanism to ensure that there will be adequate public facilities to support new development."

Now that sounds like the same County Executive who summed up his concerns with the growth policy transportation test in a 2007 Washington Post editorial by stating "We need a new traffic test to ensure that adequate road and transit capacity is in place before development goes forward. Tests are not tests if everyone gets a passing grade. What we put on paper should reflect the reality that county residents experience on the roads every day. We should not adopt a policy that claims there is adequate transportation infrastructure to accommodate growth in any area where the traffic stacks up regularly."

I am still puzzled that Mr. Leggett has taken two years to work on an alternative to PAMR, something he said could and should be done by mid-2008. Still, I am pleased to note his resolve in completing that effort in the next six to nine months, and offering an improved transportation test to Council for their consideration by the middle of next year.

"We need an alternative to PAMR," Mr. Leggett forcefully states in his memo submitted to Council this week. "I have directed the Department of Transportation to hire a consultant who will work to develop a workable alternative to PAMR. Through that effort, which will include outreach to Planning Board and Council staffs, specific stakeholders and the general public, I expect we will have a series of policy discussions that should lead to a more transparent and easily understood Policy Area (Transportation) Review."

I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the Council and Planning Board staff will work in earnest with the Executive Branch in crafting reliable, effective and easily understood tests for traffic and transit capacity to ensure there is adequate infrastructure before allowing new development projects to go forward. After all, that's the law in Montgomery County--the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance. And the key purpose of

the growth policy, as Mr. Leggett notes, is in implementing that law by staging the pace of growth to match the ability of the county government to provide supportive infrastructure to accommodate that growth.

In his September 15 memo, the County Executive included comments on several other changes to the Growth Policy which the Planning Board has recommended to the County Council. And a great many of those comments are in line with the Growth Policy position which the delegates to the Montgomery County Civic Federation adopted at our September 14 monthly meeting. We can only hope that the County Council will pay close attention to the County Executive, the Civic Federation, and county residents concerned about increasing traffic congestion, inadequate transit and overburdened schools, when they hold their hearing on the Growth Policy the evening of September 22.

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