

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - September 24, 2009

Did Council destroy the Planning Board vision for Germantown?

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Comm.

When the members of the Montgomery County Planning Board adopted their recommended revision of the Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan last April and sent it to the Council for approval, the Plan called for adding 9,000 new housing units in the area and enough commercial space to create 45,000 jobs. Some Germantown residents and leaders of citizen groups were concerned the Plan called for too much growth.

A great deal of citizen concern over the scale of this new vision for Germantown was allayed by the fact that the Planning Board had inserted "staging" into the Plan, or a schedule on which new development could be approved. This staging would be triggered by certain infrastructure--road and transit improvements--being built, or at least funded for near-term construction. The Board reasoned that the Town Center should be the first section of the Plan to be redeveloped. Growth outside this core, such as the area east of I-270 near the Montgomery College Germantown campus, would receive approval to build only after additional infrastructure was in place.

This staging element in the Plan sounded logical, initially allowing some new housing and jobs in new retail and office space to be created in the Germantown Town Center while delaying construction of a majority of the Plan. The theory was that by first creating a vibrant core, residents moving into the new developments surrounding the core would have jobs and shopping opportunities available in close proximity, and this might decrease the likelihood they would hop in their cars and drive out of the area to work or shop. Then, before the bulk of the Plan could be developed the CCT would have to be built to Town Center and that station opened for use. And before the final third of the Plan could be approved for construction, the CCT would have to be built and in use through to Clarksburg.

This sounded like a pretty good plan, although some folks, including me, were still concerned that the Plan allowed too much density yet anticipated only 30% of residents and employees in the area would use mass transit. This meant the remaining 70% would be driving personal vehicles and creating worse traffic congestion than now exists on I-270 and local roads. Nonetheless, we held out great hope that the staging the Board recommended would save the day, helping to prevent an already traffic congested area from going into gridlock. But then the Plan went to the Council for approval, and it was referred to the Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee for worksessions.

The first thing the PHED Committee did was strip the staging out of the Plan. This was puzzling since the Chairman of the PHED Committee is District 2 Council member Mike Knapp, and Germantown is located in the District he represents. Didn't he think his constituents would prefer to see growth occur in Germantown conditioned on road improvements and the CCT public transit system being in place to accommodate that growth? Wasn't he aware that his constituents in Clarksburg were thrilled that the trigger for Stage 3 of the Germantown Plan was a requirement that the CCT be built and opened through to Clarksburg? After all, Clarksburg is purported to be a transit oriented community, but residents there are still waiting for adequate mass transit service.

Planning Board Royce Hanson objected to the PHED Committee stripping the staging from the Germantown Plan, and he asked it be remanded back to the Board and Planning Department for reworking since, in his view, the change had so drastically altered the Plan that it no longer matched the vision or intention of the Board. It was not remanded. Then, on July 22, Hanson sent a letter to Council President Phil Andrews requesting that staging triggers be reinserted in the Plan. This was not

done. In fact, as far as I can tell, the primary action of the Council in its deliberation on the Germantown Plan was to increase the amount of allowed new housing from the Board-approved 9,000 units to 10,800 units.

The County Council adopted the resolution approving the new Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan this past Tuesday, September 22. And there's no staging in the Plan because, according to Council member Knapp, Germantown needs to be built and nothing should stand in the way of that taking place. And Germantown is in Knapp's District, so the rest of the Council gave him what he wanted.

Is this really good land use planning which the Council has adopted for Germantown, rejecting as they did the best advice and counsel of the experts in the field, the Planning Department and Board? Or was this more a case of a politician, or politicians, catering to the wishes of the development industry, an industry which has been quite generous with past campaign contributions, on a master plan revision which will be quite profitable for the developers? After all, special interest donations to politicians, given to acknowledge favorable legislative actions, are as old as the game of politics itself.

In the end, whether one chooses to believe the gross alteration of this master plan is a case of political *quid pro quo* or that our County Council members acted in what they believe is the best interest of the public, one thing is certain--we will all be sitting in slower traffic on I-270 when redevelopment of the new Germantown begins. And Clarksburg will remain a transit oriented community with no transit for a while longer...the best guess is that the CCT will reach there by the year 2030.

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