

"Federation Corner" column
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Respecting the suburban lifestyle

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

For many months now, Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley has been traveling the county and talking to civic and business groups on his proposals for the county growth policy. The PowerPoint presentation which accompanies his lecture includes a slide containing the factoid that 75% of the developed land in Montgomery County contains single-family homes, while at the same time Mr. Stanley asserts that this is an obsolete land use model which will not exist in the future.

When the Planning Board came to Rockville on the morning of Tuesday, October 13 to deliver their Semi-Annual Report to the County Council, Mr. Stanley accompanied the Board and rolled out his newest pet project: a slick piece of video propaganda touting so-called "smart growth." The film is designed to convert viewers to the New Urbanist philosophy that densely packed, mixed-use development concentrated around transit centers is, and should be, the primary land use form in the future.

Following the slide presentation and showing of the video, Councilmembers Phil Andrews (D.-At Large) and Roger Berliner (D.-District One, which includes Potomac, Bethesda and the North Bethesda/White Flint area) defended the suburban communities in the county in which most Montgomery residents live. Their remarks, which I transcribed from a tape of the Council session, follow.

Councilmember Andrews: "I want to answer one of the questions that was asked in the presentation, which was 'should quality of life be measured by how long it takes people to drive somewhere.' And my answer would be 'yes.' It certainly is one important measure because, for the foreseeable future at least, and I think after the foreseeable future as well, most people in Montgomery County will continue to drive as their primary way of getting around, given the development patterns that exist in the county now and which will continue to be the dominant development pattern well into the future. So that's why I believe it is a critical measure for quality of life. It's certainly not the only one, but I think it's a crucial one for many of our residents. So, the question was asked and that's one council member's response."

Councilmember Berliner: "I want to speak directly to Mr. Stanley with respect to an issue...and I've had a brief conversation with the Chairman, with respect to this, as well. And it does relate to the languaging of our Growth Policy, the languaging of "smart growth" initiatives, the languaging of White Flint, and a belief in certain parts of the community that their lifestyle and their neighborhoods are threatened by this county's increasing embrace of "smart growth" and the New Urbanism. And I find that to be very unfortunate and problematic, creating a backlash that I don't believe is productive or necessary; but, is fed by a belief that a lifestyle of suburban community is not respected, and should not be respected, and will not be tolerated in the future.

"So, when I look at "smart growth," when I look at the initiatives coming to our community, I perceive that District One is among those that perceives itself to be most threatened by the evolution of our policies. And I want you to know that I don't think it's necessary. I think that we have shown in Bethesda that the neighborhoods immediately surrounding Bethesda have been those that have seen their property values increase the most, and the quality of their life be enhanced the most. And that absolutely has to be our bottom line objective here: that our existing neighborhoods, and this vision that we hold for White Flint or otherwise, are compatible visions, so that they are not being asked to make a sacrifice to welcome the 200,000 new people that are coming to Montgomery County. Nor is it necessary, in my view, that they do so.

"So I would just ask you to be aware of the anxiety that is engendered by this evolving policy of ours, and to make certain that you keep uppermost in your own minds, as you have your conversations with the community, the need to be respectful of lifestyles that have been chosen and that are deeply honored here."

Councilmember Andrews: "One of the things that I think is important to underscore is that one of the reasons that existing communities have so much claim on our attention is that not only do most people live there now, of course, but those existing communities will be where most people in the future will live, as well. So the future is very much on our mind, when we look at the impacts on existing communities of development proposals. And sometimes we think of the future just in terms of the residents that will live in the new developments, and we don't think enough about the great majority of future residents that will live in existing developments, which is simply a fact, given we are so far along the development path in the county."

I thank Councilmembers Andrews and Berliner for their remarks, on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Montgomery County residents who live in suburban communities throughout this county.

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