

"Federation Corner" column
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Who's looking out for the needs of county residents?

by Ralph Schofer, Bethesda resident and 50 year member of Institute of Transportation Engineers

The current Growth Policy for Montgomery County guides the timing of development and the provision of adequate public services. The growth policy implements a 1973 law, the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance; and it helps the Planning Board ensure basic amenities are in place, like hassle-free roads and uncrowded schools for current and future residents, before approving development projects. This law strives to provide a balance between new development and basic infrastructure, and benefits both county residents and developers.

The Planning Board has recommended the County Council make changes to the growth policy that are designed to further encourage development around corridors which are well-served by transit: rail and bus. While this, of course, is of great virtue, a significant number of people probably move to Montgomery County to live in detached single family homes with a bit of land where children can play and residents can enjoy the other aspects of relatively low-density living. Densely developed condos and apartments are not always attractive to young families with children. But, with the family age increasing and the rising incidence of empty nesters, the market for more dense developments in urban areas with many features within walking distance may well be growing. However, the Board's proposal would remove the existing checks which assure balance between development and public facilities. In a sense, it vitiates the Adequate Public Facilities law.

If development, which is not a dirty word and should be encouraged, is not carefully monitored by some type of adequate public facilities validation, quality of life in Montgomery County could degrade at a rapid pace. If the service quality of our auto and transit systems are not monitored for capacity limitations, all residents of the county, new and existing, including the development industry, will be significantly disadvantaged. It is absolutely necessary to forecast demand resulting from proposed development before it is built, to assure that adequate public facilities are available.

It is not sufficient to estimate travel by adjusting development rates (dwelling units and square feet of commercial area) and hypothesizing modal choice of work trips. The proposed growth policy subsumes that many people buying homes in a new development will use transit to travel to and from work. However, transit is useful only if it serves both trip origin and destination. Many times, home selection is based upon desired housing location and characteristics, social relationships, children's friends and activities, family, schools and even religious affiliation. The choice of domicile is not solely dependent on travel means to employment. Often, when employment location changes, domicile does not change and travel to employment is distended. So it is likely that a significant number of residents must travel to work by automobile. The transition from auto travel to transit can be slow. It took the National Institutes of Health (NIH) 15 years to achieve non-auto commuting by 45% of their employees.

In the early 1990s, the NIH initiated a policy of encouraging transit commuting by its employees, and now says it has changed the composition of travel to work. Today, 50% of the employees are in single driver autos, 25% arrive by public transit, 8% arrive by autos in multi-passenger car pools, and 7% either walk or bike to work or bike. It should be noted that NIH positively controls 100% of on-site parking, can dispense continuing passenger subsidies to employees using transit, and is the sole employer and, therefore, in charge of Transportation Demand Management at the Bethesda Campus. Notwithstanding these massive controls, it took fifteen years to reach this modal distribution of work trips.

The Adequate Public Facilities law requires the Planning Board, before approving a new development, to find

that roads have sufficient capacity to handle the traffic which will be generated by the project. It is therefore necessary to have a test for road level of service as a component of the growth policy. Some arterial streets serve through traffic; others serve the land by providing access to adjacent developments. Many arterials serve both the land and through traffic. This is typical in Montgomery County. It complicates the planning and operation of these multi-purpose streets.

It is necessary to explore the operation of arterial streets both at the intersections and along the route. The current local area traffic test is useful at isolated intersections. However, it does not provide useful information on queuing along the route and time and delay of route travel. And the currently used broader area traffic test pays lip service to this information gap, but is probably not the best answer available. A better solution would be to employ the computer simulation techniques used by the State Highway Administration to evaluate route performance. Many of these techniques are quite sophisticated and calibrate well with ground observations. Their "goodness of fit" measures are impressive and they are a preferred tool in evaluating adequacy of public facilities.

The changes currently proposed to the growth policy would serve to expedite development but would not assure adequate public facilities. This initially favors early development, but would not be advantageous to existing and future residents or to developers either, as employees, clients and tenants find future access/egress difficult or impossible thus affecting rental opportunities.

If the County Council weakens the growth policy in order to facilitate approval of new building projects, then who is looking out for the existing 951,000 residents of Montgomery County to ensure the infrastructure is adequate to meet their needs?

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