

"Federation Corner" column
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Passing the buck

by Jim Humphrey,
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With the county government facing a projected budget shortfall now approaching \$400 million for the fiscal year beginning next July 1, the County Council this week went on a spending binge that rivals any fashion obsessed teenager on a shopping spree with daddy's credit card. And just like that teenager, members on this Council are hopeful that the bill for their spending will not be their responsibility, but will be passed along to others--probably in the form of increased taxes and cuts in services impacting our children and their children.

While approving the growth policy for the next two years on Tuesday, November 10, Council members gave their usual lip service to making sure developers pay their fair share for schools, roads and transit improvements needed to accommodate new development projects. But members then voted to encourage development in fourteen so-called smart growth areas in the county by slashing the amount of money that will be collected from developers to pay for needed infrastructure.

As an example of the impact of the Council decision, let's look at its effect on development projects planned for White Flint. Under the process in place prior to the vote on Tuesday, developers seeking project approval to build in this area would have had to mitigate 35% of the number of vehicle trips their projects were calculated to generate, at a cost equivalent of \$11,000 per trip. The Council already knew that the Planning Board intends to reduce the trip generation rate in White Flint, and other Metro Station areas, by 18%. But the Council then approved an alternative mitigation process whereby developers in the White Flint area will waive 25% of required payments, because their projects are located in proximity to transit service. In total, the county government will receive only half of the revenue it would have before the Council and Planning Board changes, revenue needed to build transportation infrastructure in the White Flint area.

Why does the government need funding for transportation improvements in White Flint? Because the Council is expected within months to rezone properties in that area to allow 12,000 more housing units to be built than currently exist and enough commercial space to create 25,800 more jobs. And the revised master plan calls for a network of new local roads to the east and west of Rockville Pike, and a boulevard concept for reconstruction of the Pike including center through lanes, side access lanes and a circulator bus system to eventually service an area stretching from the National Naval Medical Center to downtown Rockville. That shouldn't cost much, huh. So why not cut the amount developers will pay for new infrastructure by half. Good work, Council.

The Council also did away with the moratorium that would have nixed new approvals of residential projects in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Northwest, Seneca Valley, and Clarksburg high school cluster areas resulting from projected student enrollment in excess of 120% of classroom capacity--Clarksburg lacking middle school capacity, and the others facing an elementary level shortage. Heaven forbid the county government should tell developers that there isn't sufficient school capacity to allow approval of any more new housing projects in an area. (Wait...isn't that just what the growth policy was designed to do?) So the Council voted to spend a total of \$31,890,000 within the next five years to add classroom capacity in these four clusters, ignoring a plea from County Executive Leggett not to commit this money which had been set aside in a reserve fund for emergencies.

By the way, a school capacity based moratorium on new residential approvals in an area does not mean all construction would be halted. In the B-CC area, for example, there are thirteen residential projects already

approved but not yet built, which will include 1600 new housing units. The moratorium would not have prevented construction from going forward on these already-approved projects, which are only waiting on an economic recovery to free up funding. What a moratorium might have halted, however, was developer contribution checks to certain Council members' reelection campaigns.

As the cherry on the sundae of overspending this past Tuesday, the Council debated the merits of light rail versus a bus rapid transit (BRT) system for the Corridor Cities Transitway, planned to run from Clarksburg through Germantown and the new West Gaithersburg 'Science City' to the Shady Grove Metro Station. For the uninformed, the buses used in a BRT system are the equal in size and comfort of any light rail cars, and typically run in dedicated lanes apart from other traffic. The light rail option will cost upwards of \$1 billion and not reach Germantown until 2030--Clarksburg would have to wait even longer. A bus rapid transit system would cost half that amount and could be built in half the time. But a majority of Council members favor the light rail option. So, while the government is on a hot dog budget, the Council is ordering filet mignon.

Councilmember Leventhal stated he will vote for light rail because it is the only option that has been discussed for some time, and he's sure that if the Council opts for BRT there will be a barrage of emails from angry constituents. As the saying goes, if you can't stand the heat then get out of the kitchen. Council members were elected to make tough choices and come up with workable solutions. And wasn't it Mr. Leventhal who challenged citizens during the budget discussion three years ago to make suggestions on where to make cuts? Well, I know how you can save a half a billion dollars, Mr. Councilmember...by voting for the Corridor Cities Transitway to be a bus rapid transit system. Any other vote is just passing the buck.

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