

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Traffic congestion hurts quality of life**

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As part of its Semi-Annual Report to the County Council on October 13, the Planning Department staff made a pitch for directing growth to areas around Metro stations and other transit centers. In their presentation, the question was asked: "Should quality of life be measured by how long it takes people to drive somewhere?"

To his credit, then-Council President Phil Andrews responded "Yes. It certainly is one important measure because, for the foreseeable future at least...most people in Montgomery County will continue to drive as their primary way of getting around."

On December 2, the international traffic database company TomTom, headquartered in Amsterdam, released their list of the 25 United States cities, or jurisdictions with population over 500,000, which have the worst traffic congestion. Montgomery County came in 4th on their list, with 37% of our roads meeting the standard as congested. Only Seattle, Los Angeles and Chicago have worse congestion--even New York City has fewer congested streets than Montgomery County.

Elsewhere in the region, Washington D.C. was listed 7th with 30% of its roads being congested; Alexandria took 9th with 28%; Fairfax County ranked 12th with 26%; and Arlington County placed 22nd, with 23% of their roads being congested. TomTom compiled the list using aggregates of actual speeds that millions of anonymous professional fleet drivers have traveled over the last two years, collected by means of GPS-enabled (Global Positioning Satellite) software. Prince George's didn't make the list.

The press release from TomTom explains that "traffic was defined as congested if drivers could travel at only 70% or less of the posted speed limit, meaning on average an hour long commute included 20 minutes or more of significant delays." The traffic data compiled by our own Planning Department paints a grimmer picture.

West of Gaithersburg, around Shady Grove Hospital, vehicles in weekday afternoon rush hours travel at an average of 57% of free-flow speed, defined as the speed limit plus some time for stopping at traffic signals. In Silver Spring and Kensington/Wheaton, vehicles travel at 49% of free-flow speed. In the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area, traffic moves at 45% of free-flow speed. And around White Flint in North Bethesda, the area with the worst traffic congestion, vehicles in afternoon rush hours travel only 43% of free-flow speed. Remember, as Councilmember Marc Elrich recently pointed out, these are average speeds for these areas. That means if traffic is flowing at near the speed limit on smaller neighborhood roads, then vehicles on the main roads are traveling far slower than the average speed listed for the area.

Why then, you might ask, is the County Council intent on partnering with the Planning Department to increase the amount of development allowed in so many areas of the county--Twinbrook, Germantown, White Flint, Gaithersburg West, Kensington, Langley Park and Wheaton?

The pro-development clique on the County Council--members Floreen, Knapp, Leventhal, Ervin and Navarro--try to downplay traffic congestion, and justify the accelerating urbanization by claiming that, increasingly, folks will give up driving to take mass transit. Those are high expectations for a county in which, by the Planning Department's own admission, the best level of transit service exists in Bethesda, where the average commute time by transit is 36% longer than the average commute by car. In Damascus and Clarksburg, the average transit commute takes twice the time of the average commute by car. The rest of the county falls miserably between those two.

We're told by the development industry and its cohorts on the Council that the county must grow in order to be competitive in attracting new businesses. Otherwise, we will lose out to other counties, states, or countries in the competition for new jobs. That sounds good but it's really a non-answer, the equivalent of saying "we have to grow so we can compete for jobs and grow." One official recently stated, "in order for our county to move forward, we must continue to grow." I'm not sure where he thinks we're moving, but we need not grow to get there. Improve, yes; but grow, no.

Some officials assert Montgomery must attract new businesses and population to increase tax revenue, which will help to balance the budget. This answer doesn't pass the smell test either. We were told the same thing decades ago. But what have we gotten in return for the growth of the past twenty years? We now face a projected budget shortfall for the next fiscal year of more than \$600 million, the largest in the county's history. By facilitating growth our officials have deepened the fiscal hole for the county, compounded by their inability to provide the infrastructure--schools, roads, transit--needed to accommodate that growth.

What corporate executive in his right mind would willingly choose to move his company to Montgomery County, which has the 4th worst traffic congestion in the nation? (Maybe he could sell his employees on the move by telling them that their kids would have the opportunity to attend school in a trailer.) With the connectivity afforded by the internet, it is no longer necessary for companies to locate to this region in order to have access to the Federal bureaucracy in Washington. Companies can staff a small liaison office here, while locating corporate headquarters in bucolic Bozeman, Montana or sleepy Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The final argument the pro-development gang uses is that Montgomery County has always been, and must remain, the economic engine for the State of Maryland. Why? Montgomery currently supplies 21% of all county-generated revenue to the State. Let's let some of the other 22 counties take up the slack while we figure out how to balance the budget with the number of jobs and population we've currently got, because if we can't do it now we'll never be able to do it by growing bigger.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*