

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - January 21, 2010

White Flint plan out of balance

Just plan "dumb" growth

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

In a January 15 memo to the County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee, Deputy Council Staff Director Glenn Orlin shared his finding that the density of development being proposed in the new White Flint master plan will generate an unacceptable level of traffic congestion in that area, even if all of the road and transit improvements called for in the plan are made.

This comes as no surprise to folks who had reached the same conclusion months ago, chief among them officials in the county Department of Transportation (DOT) as well as County Executive Ike Leggett. In his October 5 memo to Council on the proposed White Flint plan, Leggett opined that "the plan should either recommend transportation improvements to eliminate failing intersections or provide for development at a level that can be met without intersections failing."

Dr. Orlin states in his recent memo that "the level of development within White Flint would have to be reduced significantly" in order to prevent the road system in the White Flint area from receiving a failing grade under the transportation test instituted by the County Council. As a part of the county growth policy it approved last November, the Council deemed it unacceptable for roads to operate at or below a Level of Service "E," which is the grade assigned when traffic moves at only 40% of free-flow speed. Free-flow speed is essentially the posted speed limit, factoring some additional time for stops at traffic signals.

An analysis by the Planning Department and Council staff determined that the amount of development being proposed for White Flint--9,800 new dwelling units and 5.69 million square feet of commercial space--would generate so much additional traffic that roads in the area would operate at only 36.8% of free-flow speed. That level of service equates to traffic moving around 13 miles per hour on a road with a 35 mile per hour speed limit, like Rockville Pike. But remember, the 36.8% calculation is an average of speeds on all roads in the area. So if traffic is flowing at or near 100% of the posted speed on most of the smaller neighborhood streets off of Rockville Pike, then traffic on Rockville Pike would be moving even slower than 13 miles an hour during weekday morning and afternoon rush hours.

Dr. Orlin goes on to state in his memo that "Planning staff and Council staff concur that to reach 40% RAM, only the proposed development in Phase 1 of the staging plan can be approved now: 3,000 dwelling units and 2 million square feet of non-residential development." For those who aren't fluent in county government acronyms, RAM stands for "Relative Arterial Mobility" or, in plain language, road level of service.

It should be noted that the rule of thumb applied as part of county growth planning estimates that one new job is created for each 250 square feet of commercial space which is built. This means that the 2 million square feet of commercial space that Planning and Council staff is now recommending for White Flint, which is less than one-third of the level originally proposed in the plan, would still result in some 8,000 new jobs being created in this area. Add to this number the 3,000 new housing units that staff is recommending, which again is less than one-third of the level originally proposed in the plan. The result could be some 11,000 more vehicles on White Flint area roads each weekday, carrying new residents out of the area and new employees into the area.

But the Council members on the PHED Committee have come up with a way to cut the projected number of new vehicles on White Flint area roads in half, at least on paper, by assuming a goal of 50% of all employees with jobs in White Flint not driving to work. And, of course, convincing 50% of current employees in the area

to carpool, walk, bike or use public transit to get to work would also cut down on the amount of existing traffic. By the way, this target is referred to as "non-auto-driver mode share," and the PHED Committee members upped the goal from 39% in the original plan to the 50% level at a worksession last October.

In his October 5 memo to Council, County Executive Leggett included comments from officials at the DOT declaring a 39% non-auto-driver mode share target was "ambitious and possibly unrealistic, given the current 26% rate." One can only imagine what the reaction of DOT officials is to the new 50% non-auto-driver mode share goal set by the PHED, which would still result in some 5,500 additional cars on the roads in White Flint if the recommendation for less than one-third of the development than originally proposed is adopted.

Lest we forget, before the Federal government decided to pony up funds to help make road and transit improvements needed to accommodate the Walter Reed move to the National Naval Medical Center, the County Council was screaming bloody murder that 2,200 new jobs being shifted to Navy Med would throw the Pike into gridlock. So how is it okay for the Council to approve plans for 8,000 new jobs and 3,000 new housing units along Rockville Pike just 2 miles to the north of Navy Med, let alone the 9,800 dwelling units and 23,000 or so jobs proposed in the original White Flint master plan revision?

The position of record of the Montgomery County Civic Federation is that unless proposed growth can be supported by sufficient levels of planned infrastructure--including adequate roads, transit, schools, and critical public safety services--then even so-called "smart growth" which is located at transit hubs is just plain dumb.

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