

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Truth of county east-west jobs rift**

*Will the truth teller stand up*

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

The more senior readers of this column might remember a television game show that aired several decades ago called To Tell the Truth. The premise of the show was that three contestants all claimed to be the same person, who had achieved some major or minor accomplishment in their life. They tried to stump a panel of celebrities whose job it was to figure out which of the three was the actual person by asking a series of yes-no questions. At the end of the questioning, the celebrity panelists would record their guesses and the moderator would say, "Will the real (person's name) please stand up." The three contestants then split some amount of money awarded for each of the celebrities who had voted incorrectly for one of the pretenders.

Earlier this week, a regional newspaper carried the story that there is a growing rift between the eastern and western sides of Montgomery County relating to jobs creation. While residents in the east county have been promised for decades that quality jobs will be created in their communities, most of the rezoning to accommodate job growth is focused in master plan revisions for communities along the I-270 corridor. A county jobs forecast shows that by the year 2030 only about 10,000 new jobs could be created on the county's east side, while some 61,000 new jobs could be created along the I-270/MD 355 corridor, most of them in the Germantown and Gaithersburg areas.

This is a real life To Tell the Truth issue. Somebody in county government isn't telling residents the truth.

In June of 2009, the Planning Board had just sent a rewrite of the Germantown Employment Area master plan to the County Council for consideration. The plan rewrite recommended upzoning of most of the properties in the area to allow taller and bigger commercial buildings which, when built, would accommodate more than 25,000 new jobs over the existing number. At the same time, the Board was preparing to transmit to Council a proposed master plan revision for the area west of Gaithersburg, referred to as "Science City," to allow 22,000 more jobs than the 17,000 that could already be created under the existing plan.

When the members of the Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee met with the Planning Board and Department on June 15, 2009, for the first worksession on the Germantown plan, Board Chairman Royce Hanson was asked a disarmingly simple sounding question: "Would the upzoning of properties recommended in the revised Germantown and Gaithersburg West master plans absorb all of the current market demand for science and technology space in the county?" He replied that he believed those two master plans would absorb all of the market demand for science and technology space in the county, and not only at present but probably for many years to come, given the current national economic crisis.

The news was alarming, especially given that the county government has purchased land along Route 29 from the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, where it is proposes to build an East County Science and Technology Center. The site must be rezoned to accommodate the new center, however, which will itself require a master plan revision. So what are the chances that this East County center, with its promise of new jobs, will be built anytime soon if the market demand for properties zoned for science and technology use is more than met along the I-270 corridor?

On July 22 of last year, Councilmembers Nancy Navarro (D.-District 4) and Valerie Ervin (D.-District 5), who represent the east county, sent a letter to the Planning Board which stated, in part:

"As you work with us on the Gaithersburg West Plan, it is important that you don't lost site (sic) of the vision for a second bio-tech center on Route 29. There has been a long-standing commitment to attract biotech development as well as to address the jobs/housing imbalance in the Route 29 corridor. How to ensure that the potential for employment and development in the Route 29 corridor isn't negatively impacted by everything that is planned for the 'science city' must be part of the discussion."

On November 9th of last year, the East County Citizens Advisory Board sent a letter to Councilmember Navarro thanking her for her support, and stating "For too long, the county's policy has been to concentrate economic development in the I-270 corridor, to the detriment of the Route 29 corridor."

The Director of the County's Department of Economic Development, Steve Silverman, responded to the above claim in an article published this January in a local newspaper. He is quoted as saying, "There's plenty of opportunity both east and west for a thriving life sciences community."

Then, at a meeting on February 2, Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley distributed to Council members the county 2030 jobs forecast, which I mentioned in the second paragraph above. As he handed it out he told them to disregard the study as unreliable, stating that his department will conduct a new study in three years. The problem is that the Council will vote on revision of the Gaithersburg West plan this year; and if that plan absorbs all market demand for biotech space, then the damage to the east county will be done.

So, who is telling the truth? Is it the Planning Board Chair who stated that development of properties along the I-270 corridor would more than meet the need for county biotech space for some years to come? Is it the Director of Economic Development who contradicted the Chairman's claim, stating there will be sufficient demand to create life sciences jobs in the east and west county? Or is it the Director of the Planning Department who told the Council that the jobs forecast just released by his department, showing a west county bias towards job creation through the year 2030, is unreliable?

Will the real honest and truthful county government employee please stand up?

*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)*