

"Federation Corner" column
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Season of campaign promises here again

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

September 14 Primary Election Day is less than 3 months away. Soon the chorus of promises resonating from the campaign trail will rise in volume, with incumbents and wannabes fighting for attention from Montgomery County voters. So this might be a good time for county residents to recall some of the promises made four years ago, especially those concerning a chief concern of voters--the impact of new construction on worsening traffic congestion.

In 2006, then-candidate for the office of County Executive Ike Leggett promised to slow construction in the county, and to tackle the deficit of roads, schools and infrastructure needed to accommodate development already in place. He was elected along with five County Council members who also promised to slow growth or better manage it (Roger Berliner, Marc Elrich, Phil Andrews, Duchy Trachtenberg, and Marilyn Praisner, who passed away in February 2008). Two days after his election, Leggett was quoted in a newspaper article as saying "I feel very good about the Council. They recognized what was a very strong mandate from citizens in Montgomery County."

Polls conducted by the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun earlier in 2009 had showed growth and traffic congestion to be leading concerns across the state, but particularly in Montgomery County. Leggett said he would push to reinstate "policy area review," which used formulas to determine whether communities were too overwhelmed by traffic to accommodate new development. The developer friendly majority of the previous Council, the self-labeled the End Gridlock slate, had eliminated the process in 2003, with backing from former County Executive Doug Duncan.

To their credit, in November 2007 the members of the current County Council instated a new policy area transportation test. However, Leggett objected to it saying it "provides results that do not accurately reflect actual transportation capacity, is difficult to understand and thus is not transparent to County residents," a sentiment echoed by many civic activists. Yet it took the County Executive until this past March--two and a half years--to transmit to the Council his recommendation for an improved process.

When Praisner, as Council President in 2007, proposed a moratorium on approval of new development projects while she and her colleagues considered a new tougher growth policy for the county, only three Council members backed the proposal (Elrich, Andrews and Trachtenberg). "I wanted to assure our residents that we have heard the call to moderate growth," Praisner is quoted as saying. But even though the moratorium would not have applied to projects already approved for construction--tens of thousands of housing units and enough commercial space to generate almost 90,000 new jobs--a Council with a majority of members professing concern over excessive growth failed to take definitive action.

Worse than this, in the intervening years the Council has reduced the amount of money collected from new development in Metro station areas to help fund needed infrastructure, claiming it provides an incentive to focus growth in transit centers and prevents sprawl. Yet residential development in the county's Agricultural Reserve and so-called "large lot" rural areas continues unabated, since it is allowed under current zoning for those areas.

As Council member Elrich has stated, the only way to prevent sprawl is to rezone and reduce the amount of development allowed in rural areas. Instead, this Council has approved rewrites of four community master plans that increased allowed density of development by 30,000 more dwelling units and millions more square feet of commercial space, added growth that will occur in addition to rural sprawl. And the justification for

densifying two of these communities--Germantown and the 'Science City' area west of Gaithersburg--is that they are so-called smart growth "transit centers" along the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway alignment, although it is not likely the CCT mass transit system will be built to service these areas for fifteen to twenty years.

Thank goodness this Council shared the citizens' concern about growth. Think what a pro-development Council could have approved!

In his December 2006 Inaugural Address, County Executive Leggett stated "We also must expect and continue to demand a responsive, effective, fiscally responsible and efficient county administration. In order to accomplish these objectives government must be held accountable." To that end, soon after taking office he instituted the CountyStat program, a process of managing for results which, according to the program website, "relies on the strategic use of data and analytics to monitor and improve the performance, effectiveness, and efficiency of County services."

For more than a year, CountyStat employees only collected data and created benchmarks for assessment. Finally, in March 2009, the effort resulted in a first year cost savings of \$5.3 million by better managing and reducing overtime hours paid to public safety and transportation employees, according to a county press release. Inexplicably, in his State of the County Address last December Leggett announced "in its first year of its operation CountyStat helped to reduce overtime costs by \$16 million." But, who's counting...

In his December speech, the County Executive also announced he was moving forward at building a better, leaner government that is both responsive and accountable. "Our new 3-1-1 one-stop, phone and online information system, which we expect to launch soon, is a prime example," he said. Today, six months after this speech and some four years after Leggett promised this system while campaigning for his job, the county 3-1-1 system has finally been launched.

Once in office, our elected officials sometimes conveniently forget the promises they made while campaigning. And sometimes it is not so much a matter of forgetting their promises as it is one of making unrealistic claims regarding the timing of their fulfillment. Sill, while incumbents have a record in office to extol or explain while campaigning, both they and the newbies to the political arena will continue to make promises which I suggest the voters take with a grain of salt, as the saying goes...a very large grain of salt.

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