

"Federation Corner" column
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Year of challenges lies ahead

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Last week we focused on the accomplishments and shortcomings of the past year. This week, we explore the challenges that lie ahead for Montgomery County in the new year.

The budget will be a top priority this year, and will impact all other programs and issues. In preparation for budget season this spring, the County Council will study the report from the Office of Legislative Oversight entitled "Achieving a Structurally Balanced Budget in Montgomery County," which was released in December (see Program Note at end of this column). The Executive and Council will also study recommendations in the Organizational Reform Commission report, coming in late January.

Of critical importance to Montgomery and all other Maryland counties is passage by the General Assembly of an amendment to the "Maintenance of Effort" law, which requires counties to fund their public school systems each year at a level equal to the last year's funding plus inflation. This requirement is impossible to meet when tough economic times require across-the-board cuts in personnel and programs, and the State must recognize that fact.

Near the top of the Council's agenda for 2011 should be consideration of the transportation tests that County Executive Leggett recommends replace the current test as part of the growth policy (now called the Subdivision Staging Policy and approved by Council every 4 years starting in 2012). The CE has proposed the Transportation Policy Area Review (TPAR) to more accurately calculate transit and roads capacity to handle new development in each planning area of the county, and to require developers pay for improvements if inadequacies exist.

The tight budget will put pressure on all transportation decisions. The Bus Rapid Transit study should be released in early 2011. BRT can be built in half the time and at half the cost of light rail, making it an attractive modal choice for the Purple Line and Corridor Cities Transitway and along routes not currently programmed for transit projects.

The State may have little or no money for transportation capital projects or even basic maintenance in the fiscal year starting next July, once its \$1.6 billion projected shortfall is addressed. So, the county could be hard pressed to go forward with projects requiring any portion of State funding. This will hit hard areas like "Science City" west of Gaithersburg, where nearly \$1 billion in intersection improvements, and building of the Corridor Cities Transitway to the area, would be needed to support the increased level of development the Council approved in 2010 for this community.

Nearly half the residential roads in the county need repaving. There is a backlog in excess of 1,000 trees in the public rights-of-way in Montgomery that need critical maintenance, or removal and replacement, by the county Highway Maintenance Division. And there is approximately a 20 year backlog to replace cracked public sidewalks. None of this will receive sufficient funding in the upcoming year.

On the environment front, the Council needs to approve much needed amendments to the county Forest Conservation law, to increase protections and strengthen enforcement for wooded areas meeting the "forest" definition, as well legislating preservation of individual trees providing canopy in our urban areas. A bill was introduced in Council in 2007, but it has sat dormant in committee while the Forest Conservation Advisory Committee has been told for more than 2 years that revised legislation will soon be introduced.

As communities across the United States find creative new ways to reverse environmental damage done over the past decades--such as "daylighting" urban streams that had been relegated to underground culverts by raising them back to surface grade and providing green buffers--Montgomery County is lagging behind. The health of streams must be preserved by limiting imperviousness in rural areas undergoing development, like Clarksburg, and giving high priority to developers providing "green area" ((unbuilt spaces on which rainfall can percolate into the water table and replenish the headwater springs of local streams) when receiving approval to build in urban areas.

The draft rewrite of the county's zoning code, now underway, is set to be finished by the end of 2011. Planners and the public must insure the character and quality of life in our single-family residential neighborhoods is not damaged in the process, while protecting the existing affordably priced housing in these areas from demolition and replacement by builders.

And the Council must be careful not to worsen the infrastructure deficit when revising community master plans. The Purple Line, for instance, was designed to address an east-west transit deficiency in the downcounty. But it could be overwhelmed by allowing excessive additional growth around the proposed Chevy Chase Lake and Long Branch stations, resulting in as bad or worse an infrastructure deficit when the Purple Line is built than the existing deficit it was planned to alleviate.

Finally, the 3-1-1 county call system must be improved. A press release this month from the County Executive proudly announced 75% of callers were satisfied with their overall 3-1-1 experience; one in four of your customers being unsatisfied is not cause for self congratulation.

Our officials must find a way to address these challenges without raising taxes to the point where lower income residents and seniors trying to retire-in-place are forced to move out of the county. I hope our county officials are enjoying their holiday break, because they have enormous task ahead of them.

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