

"Federation Corner" column
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New infrastructure and maintenance funds needed

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In the December 22, 2011 Federation Corner column ("Paying a fair share for growth") I wrote that, in these times of budget tightening by county government, new development projects need to pay the costs for the infrastructure needed to support them. I mentioned road and transit projects, and increased school capacity, as examples of county infrastructure improvements needed to accommodate growth. But there are other types of infrastructure that also need to be enhanced in response to an increase in the number of residents or jobs in any area of the county.

Montgomery Village is experiencing an increase in the number of residents due to "empty nesters" (older couples whose children have grown and left home) moving out and being replaced by new families with children. As a result, county government decided to build a new police substation on the west side of I-270 to better serve the Village. And the increase in the number of homes in North Potomac prompted the government to begin planning in 2009 for a new North Potomac Recreation Center. Both of these are examples of county building projects that would be funded through the Capital Budget. But unfortunately, due to fiscal constraints, both these projects have been deferred.

Montgomery Village and North Potomac may not be areas where there is a significant amount of new development to pay for the building of these government facilities. And when the police station and recreation center projects are eventually built, it will likely be all county taxpayers who repay the bonds issued for their construction. But that only underscores the need for developers to pay sufficient transportation and school impact taxes when constructing new homes and commercial buildings in other areas, to meet the costs of the infrastructure needed to accommodate their projects.

In last December's column I repeated a statement made by County Executive Isiah Leggett in his December 2006 Inaugural Address, that "...we need sufficient infrastructure to handle what we already have in place and what has been approved." As reported by the Planning Department in the 2010 Montgomery County Snapshot, there were 971,600 residents living in some 355,500 housing units, and there were 510,000 jobs in the county. That's the amount of growth in place. And the Planning Board has approved development projects that are yet to be built, which will contain an additional 25,500 housing units and some 25 million square feet of commercial space. Planners calculate each job equals an average 250 square feet of commercial space, so 25 million square feet would accommodate 100,000 new jobs.

Not only does the county government need to provide additional infrastructure to accommodate existing development and the homes and commercial space in projects that are approved but not yet built, it must also pay the costs of maintaining the infrastructure which already exists.

In December of 2004, then-President of the County Council Thomas Perez initiated an Infrastructure Maintenance Task Force (IMTF) and assigned its members the job of gathering information on the maintenance needs of the county's four largest agencies: Montgomery County government (the departments and offices under the County Executive and Council); Montgomery County Public Schools; Montgomery College; and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The Task Force was composed of representatives from those government entities.

In March of 2005 the members issued the First Report of the IMTF describing the funding necessary to adequately maintain these agencies' infrastructure, including school buildings, libraries, recreation centers, administrative buildings, roads, sidewalks and hiker-biker trails, garages and lots, ballfields, playgrounds, and other publicly owned facilities. IMTF's second report was published in March 2006, and it noted that future updates would be produced biennially. Its third report was published in March 2008, and the fourth was released in March 2010. The next report is due out next month.

Former Council member Marilyn Praisner, who passed away in February of 2008, served as the Initial Chair of the Infrastructure Maintenance Task Force. In addition to assessing existing maintenance, that first study identified another important goal of improving the inventory and analysis of the county's infrastructure maintenance assets and needs. Praisner is quoted as saying, "There are no ribbon cuttings and few, if any, press releases for maintenance and technology; these projects traditionally do not compete well in budget deliberations. Nevertheless, these issues require our continued attention and support."

The 2005 IMTF First Report noted that there were significant gaps in the funding of infrastructure maintenance and asset replacement, and this was years before the international economic crisis which occurred in the fall of 2008. The initial Task Force estimate was that the county had a twenty year infrastructure maintenance backlog. Unfortunately, funding levels for infrastructure maintenance and replacement have not improved much since the original dire estimates. For example, Hard Surface Trail Renovations by M-NCPPC were funded in last year's budget at only 7% of what is considered the acceptable annual replacement cost. And Street Tree Preservation was funded at only 5% of the acceptable annual level.

There is some good news. Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, and Park and Planning each have well functioning computerized asset inventory and maintenance management data bases. But the Executive Branch of government has not completed work on its data bases for buildings and transportation assets. As the 2010 IMTF Report notes, "due to budget constraints, during the past two years DGS (Department of General Services) and DOT (Department of Transportation) have redirected...resources that would otherwise have been spent to develop its asset inventory and management systems. Given the dour revenue forecasts, this trend will likely continue over the next two-year cycle."

The fifth IMTF Report issued next month will show what, if any, progress has been made on infrastructure maintenance, given the pittance that is allocated for the purpose.

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