

"Federation Corner" column
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More on the Planning Director

by Jim Humphrey
Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

In last week's Federation Corner column I detailed some shortcomings of the Director of the Montgomery County Planning Department, Rollin Stanley--his refusing to provide the County Council with requested assistance, violating a direct order from the Planning Board, and mischaracterizing those who hold opinions different from his. The latest cause for concern over his bad behavior is a recent interview for a magazine article in which he referred to a group of four women who are some of the most knowledgeable land use activists in the county--two of whom are former Planning Board Commissioners--as a "group of rich, white women...spreading fear", in reaction to their challenging his views. Public controversy seems to plague Mr. Stanley.

When his employer, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, attempted to audit his spending practices and those of his department in 2009, the Planning Director "failed to cooperate fully" and provided "misleading and contradictory information", according to the Commission's audit report. Auditors found that Stanley, who had been hired in February of 2008, had not filed expense reports for 18 months...nearly the full term of his employment to that time. In a written response to the audit Stanley acknowledged some errors in the use of his agency credit card, which he surrendered after questions were raised. And in August of 2009 he repaid the Commission for about \$600 in personal cell phone calls.

Prior to the audit incident, the Director of the Planning Department had been in the public spotlight after reports showed that he secretly waived up to \$250,000 in fines against Connelly School of the Holy Child after the elite private girls school in Potomac was accused of violating county environmental laws.

If the rule is "three strikes and you're out" Mr. Stanley is apparently beyond that--perhaps at his sixth strike.

In the recent magazine interview, Planning Director Stanley is quoted as saying "I'd never planned on doing suburbs." He previously served as a planner in Toronto, Canada, and in St. Louis--two cities which seem more appropriate locations for someone whose preference is a focus on urban planning. In a letter to Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier, the Montgomery County Civic Federation questioned whether Mr. Stanley "was ever a good fit for a county comprised of suburban communities, more densely developed transit centers, and rural areas."

The nationally recognized firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. has developed a widely adopted spectrum for land use planning that runs the gamut from low density rural and agricultural areas, to villages and small towns, to suburbs, and medium to high density urban centers. By his own words, Mr. Stanley admits that he chose a career focus only on the urban end of the DPZ spectrum.

Is it really necessary that Montgomery County continue to employ a Planning Department Director who seems less than eager to engage the entire skill set needed to defend the county's agricultural and rural land, define sustainable suburban communities, and create vibrant, livable transit centers? The great thing about Montgomery is that all of these density levels--rural, suburban and urban--are available to both residents and companies looking to locate here. And they will continue to exist, if our Planning Department takes an active role in preserving them.

Mr. Stanley's shortcomings run far deeper than his obvious preference for city planning. His managerial skills are open to criticism, too. The zoning ordinance rewrite project is a case in point. Stanley chose to

hire as consultants a company that specializes in form based zoning, a style that employs graphics and emphasizes size and location of buildings over land use. Yet he knew that the county's zoning law is text based, and gives equal weight to land use and building standards. The contract funding has now run out before the rewrite is finished, and the project is at least six months behind schedule.

The problems with the current Planning Director involve more than his lack of social skills, his meager management capabilities, and his failure to engage county residents as primary stakeholders in planning the future of their county.

A Planning Director with a full skill set should be spearheading the effort to protect and improve water quality in the county's streams, reduce the amount of impervious surface in watersheds, and encourage the "daylighting" of streams in urbanized areas that have decades ago been forced into underground pipes--an effort on which other communities are leading the nation.

A well-rounded Planning Director should be driving an initiative to preserve forested tracts in suburban and rural areas, and protect individual trees that contribute to what little tree canopy we have in the more urbanized areas of the county.

An effective Planning Director should be actively lobbying for creation of a comprehensive transit system to serve the number of new homes and jobs proposed for the Great Seneca Science Corridor and upcounty communities of Germantown and Clarksburg, and seeking to limit the development that occurs until the transit system is in place.

Thousands of new Clarksburg residents purchased homes in what was marketed to them as a transit oriented community, and thousands more may buy new homes planned for Germantown. But the Corridor Cities Transitway will not be built to Germantown for a decade or more. And who knows how long it will be before it reaches Clarksburg Town Center. Meanwhile upcounty residents sit in worsening traffic on MD 355 and I-270, driving to work and shop in downcounty areas because the employment and shopping opportunities promised in their communities have yet to materialize.

And now plans are underway to increase the amount of allowed development in the East County Science Corridor, in the absence of adequate transit to handle that planned density either.

With all of the well trained, well rounded land use planners in the nation, isn't it time for Montgomery County to hire someone better suited to head our Planning Department?

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