

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Transit Task Force report**

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On May 22, the Transit Task Force (TTF) created by County Executive Isiah Leggett released its report, which is available on the county's web site. In the report, the TTF recommends a 160 mile network of corridors along many of the existing 4 and 6-lane roads in the urban and suburban areas of the county. The Rapid Transit Vehicles (RTV) that will use these corridors will add substantial people-moving capacity and provide a true alternative to driving for many people and for many trips.

We have all heard reports that we live in the most congested major metro area in the country. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, the average commuter wasted \$154 annually in fuel in 2008 (at \$3.50 per gal). In addition, employees who travel on the roads for work also wasted an average of \$2000 for fuel and labor in 2008. This business cost is surely passed on to consumers.

The recession has reduced these "congestion taxes" some since 2008 but the long-term upward trends are certain to continue as the recession ends. The annual wasted fuel cost has progressively increased since 1982 when it was \$34 (assuming the same price per gallon).

The 2010 census found that Montgomery County lost 5000 jobs in the prior decade while Fairfax, other counties in Northern Virginia and Washington DC gained employment. There are surely multiple reasons for the loss in jobs but I think the primary one is road congestion which limits the amount of growth allowed in the county.

The loss in jobs impacts us in Montgomery County in several ways. First, those of us who live here must drive further to jobs and some people who live in neighboring jurisdictions (such as Howard or Frederick Counties) drive through our county to jobs in other neighboring jurisdictions (such as Fairfax County or Washington, DC). The extra driving adds to our congestion, creating a catch 22 situation. In addition, the reduction in jobs also means that there will be fewer taxes from business. As a result, residents will need to pay more taxes or settle for reduced services.

How do we address the road congestion? Many people think more roads are the answer. In 2000 the Planning Board formed a task force known as the Transportation Policy Report (TPR) that looked at what could be done to address the congestion. The study concluded that even if all the projects were built in a timely manner, road congestion would continue to get worse. Since roads don't address the problem by themselves, that leaves transit. The 1964, 1969 and 1993 General Plans stated the same conclusion. Contained in the TPR report was a concept to form a network of rapid and fast routes along the major 4 and 6 lane roads in the county. The TTF investigated what would need to be done to build such a network.

Let's turn to what the TTF report does recommend. For many, the terms "bus" and "bus rapid transit" have bad connotations. So the TTF chose instead to propose a Rapid Transit Vehicle (RTV) system. (The idea is that RTV should be viewed more like Metrorail but on rubber tires running on roads.) The system would be comprised of 21 corridors and be larger than other metropolitan area's system in the country. Frequent service will allow people to transfer from one corridor to another or to local buses as needed to reach their destination in a timely manner. The actual design of the routes requires substantial engineering analysis and creativity to work within congested roads that often have limited or no space to widen.

The TTF estimated the cost of the RTV system to be \$1.8 billion in today's dollars, which includes the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) from Gaithersburg to Germantown. The cost covers construction, stations, RTVs (at over \$1M each), and maintenance facilities. The TTF recommended the first phase be operational in about 5 years and the entire system be built in 10 years, which is very fast for transportation projects.

The TTF concluded that, at best, limited federal funding would be available but we should still request it. The state has had no construction funding for any new projects anywhere in the state for the last 3-4 years. They are hard-pressed to maintain what we have and undertake studies for future projects. Nevertheless, the TTF felt the state should at least pay for the CCT corridor and that the Purple line needs to be funded. The majority of the funds must come from Montgomery County, which doesn't have that level of funds available today. Thus there must be a new source of funds.

The TTF considered different taxing sources and there have been many discussions about how much of the typical Capital Improvements Program (CIP) funding can be devoted to the RTV system. I think the source of funding should consider the above funds being spent on the "congestion tax".

County Executive Leggett held a public hearing on the TTF report on July 12, and the TTF is developing a document that addresses comments. Mr. Leggett has indicated he will consider the many alternatives identified in the TTF report and then present his recommendation to the County Council, which I expect will take place in early September. I expect the Council to consider the subject over several months this fall. Depending upon what is decided state legislation may be needed to authorize some of the proposals, which could happen in the 2013 session in January-April. I don't expect final Council decision until next spring. Approval would just mean the hard engineering or coordination will get underway.

On a personal note, this is the first proposal I have seen in my 32 years of civic community work that I think will address road congestion and at the same time start to address a number of other issues, including global warming. I recall in 1980 objecting to the transit serviceability premise in what became the 1981 Eastern Montgomery County Master Plan because there was no plan or commitment for the necessary transit. Many have been calling for such a plan and commitment ever since.

*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)*