

"Federation Corner" column
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Council committee muddying infrastructure plans

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Next Tuesday, the County Council will hold its first worksession on the draft 2012 Subdivision Staging Policy (SSP), formerly known as the "Growth Policy." But before the full Council ever has a chance to consider the policy being recommended by the Planning Board, the Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee led by its Chair, Council member Nancy Floreen, is systematically unraveling the proposal.

The county growth policy used to be approved every two years. In 2009 the Council decided to shift the renamed SSP to a four year cycle, with approval of the policy taking place by November 15 in the second year of each four year Council term.

The primary purpose of the SSP is to insure that when development projects are approved by the Planning Board, the Council and Executive branch of county government have planned to provide adequate public infrastructure--school capacity, road capacity, transit facilities and other services--to accommodate the new growth.

The draft 2012 SSP proposes retaining the schools test, which levies a fee on new residential development to build classrooms in areas where added capacity is needed to accommodate growth. But this year the draft policy being recommended by the Planning Board, with a great deal of input from the Executive Branch Department of Transportation, proposes replacing the current transportation test named Policy Area Mobility Review (PAMR).

The current PAMR test weighs road capacity against transit capacity when determining whether transportation service can support additional development. For example, insufficient road capacity in Metro station areas is balanced out by the relatively good transit service there. If an area passes the test then new building projects could be approved without paying an additional fee to the county to help pay for transportation improvements.

Critics of PAMR believe the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, a county law, requires that before the Planning Board approves any new development it must make a finding that there are adequate schools, *and* roads, *and* transit...not adequate roads *or* transit. The test should not condone traffic congestion in an area just because there is good transit, or approve of lousy transit service in an area because traffic is flowing close to posted speed on roads.

The 2012 SSP would split transportation analysis into two separate tests--one for roads and another for transit. The new tests are collectively called Transportation Policy Area Review, or TPAR.

The TPAR road test averages actual traffic speed on the roads in an area in weekday afternoon rush and compares it to "free flow speed" (essentially the posted speed limit plus time for stopping at traffic lights). The test assigns each county policy area into one of three categories: urban; suburban; and rural. The Planning Board has recommended, and the Council will approve, the standard of roadway adequacy for each of those categories.

The TPAR transit test is a bit more complex, as it looks at three factors. It analyzes transit coverage in each policy area (amount of land within 1/4 mile of a bus stop or 1/2 mile of a Metro station), the average