

"Federation Corner" column
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Another view on the new roads test

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The Civic Federation Executive Committee opposes the proposed exclusion of traffic on US29 that originates in Howard County from the test for adequate road capacity. The following is an argument for supporting the exclusion.

Many emails are circulating asking citizens to contact council and oppose a proposal by two members of the Council PHED Committee to exclude traffic on US29 from the roads test under the Transportation Policy Area Review (TPAR), as requested by a developer in the White Oak area. These emails contain two significant factual errors.

The first error is that the exclusion would apply to the entire length of US29 (Howard County to DC) rather than just in the Fairland/White Oak area north of Northwest Branch Stream, which is about a mile north of the Beltway.

The second error is that only a small amount of the traffic on US29 currently comes from Howard County and the amount of through traffic that does exist is much less than the 80% reported to the PHED Committee. The contention is that the traffic is produced by development along US29 and the future development needs to eliminate the existing congestion south of New Hampshire Avenue. A report from The Traffic Group, a traffic analysis consulting firm, which is referenced in the emails shows that 71% of the traffic on US29 at New Hampshire Avenue originates in Howard County--well above what the emails contend.

At one point in time, traffic on freeways (I-270 and Beltway) was included in the growth policy, which is now called the Subdivision Staging Plan (SSP) and uses TPAR to test transportation adequacy. There was an analysis and report, if I recall correctly in the 1990s, and the decision was to remove them. The rationale was that most of the traffic is through traffic and therefore any reduction in new development would have minimal, if any, effect on traffic volumes and congestion. Also, since they are state roads, any funds collected by the county would not be used to improve them. At the time, the section of US29 north of New Hampshire was discussed in the analysis. The decision was made at that time to keep US29 in the growth policy.

Since the 1990s the nature of US29 north of New Hampshire Avenue has changed. US29 in Howard County today is a 4-lane and 6-lane limited access highway with only a single traffic signal, and then only in the southbound direction. In Montgomery County, US29 north of New Hampshire Ave would be a 6-lane limited access highway (no driveways) if all the grade separated interchanges were built that are in the Master Plans and that State Highway Administration is ready to build, pending the availability of funds.

About a decade ago, four of the interchanges were built and the other six have been on hold per guidelines in both the Fairland and White Oak Master Plans. The plans require that a study be undertaken after the four interchanges were built to determine the amount of negative impact downstream, namely south of New Hampshire. The thinking was that the interchanges would just move the AM traffic south faster and add to the backup from University Boulevard and Beltway. This backup exists every workday and starts north of New Hampshire Avenue. The backup has existed for decades.

That decision in the 1990s not to exclude US29 from the predecessor of TPAR was made before the four interchanges were built. I feel that the section of US29 north of New Hampshire with the four interchanges

now fits more into the same category as the Beltway, I-270, and I-95. Hence I support the recommendation of the two council members to exclude TPAR on US29 in the Fairland/White Oak area, as it is consistent with prior decisions. TPAR would still need to be applied to other roads in the area, like New Hampshire Avenue, Cherry Hill Road, and other major roads that cross US29.

Let's next look at proposed development in what is called the White Oak Science Gateway Master Plan. The staff draft plan will probably be presented to the Planning Board in December 2012. In September, staff presented a pre-draft to the Board, which was discussed at three sessions covering about 7-8 hours. The staff will be proposing substantial development and redevelopment in the existing commercial areas. Most citizens are for development that would add jobs to the area, and would like to see more redevelopment of the garden apartments behind the White Oak Shopping Center in order to revitalize the area.

The staff will also propose a staging plan that requiring bus rapid transit (BRT) to address existing and future traffic congestion. The Transit Task Force (TTF) recommended adding BRT on Randolph/Cherry Hill, New Hampshire and US29. Each of those routes would add the people moving capacity equivalent to 8 highway lanes (four in each direction) to each of these existing roads.

Even without the BRT, the proposed development in the White Oak Science Gateway area would provide employment for many drivers on US29, reducing the amount of traffic from Howard County south of New Hampshire Avenue that would otherwise be using it. It would also provide employment for some residents who live in eastern Montgomery County, reducing the need for them to drive long distances to jobs along I-270 and Beltway, thereby reducing the traffic on those roads. Some who would work in the new development will come from other areas and commute to White Oak but they would be driving counter to the peak direction of travel, making better use of existing road capacity.

Traffic congestion is degrading the quality of life for Montgomery County. It is also costing the average resident \$130 annually in wasted fuel cost and adding \$1495 in additional cost per business employee who uses the roads for business purposes (which is surely passed onto citizens). Congestion also leads to less development, which is largely the reason Montgomery County lost 5000 jobs over the 2000-2010 period while neighboring jurisdictions saw an increase in employment.

The loss of jobs reduces our tax base and increases road congestion since people must drive further to jobs. The BRT proposal in conjunction with the Purple line and Corridor Cities Transitway are the only proposed transportation projects that will add significant people moving capacity throughout the urban and suburban areas of the county. These projects need to be built to address the frustration the public has and why they often oppose anything that appears (either correctly or incorrectly) to add to traffic congestion.

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