

"Federation Corner" column
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County officials sending mixed signals

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The County Executive and Council have been sending mixed signals to county residents on several key issues lately.

For example, three weeks ago County Executive Isiah Leggett stated there is no money to build the countywide bus rapid transit system recommended by the Transit Task Force he appointed, not even a small version of one. But two weeks ago he announced he wants a \$1 million supplemental appropriation from the County Council to study implementing Phase One of the Task Force's plan for building the bus system. Either there's money to actually build the thing or there isn't...and if there's no money to build it, then let's not waste \$1 million on further studies.

On November 13, the County Council approved the 2012 Subdivision Staging Policy. It was called the Growth Policy until the name was changed in 2009, but both names are misnomers. It has never defined how much or how fast the county should grow. And it doesn't stage, or regulate, the rate of approval of new development projects.

The Subdivision Staging Policy applies tests to each of the 21 planning areas in the county to determine whether the capacity of three critical pieces of public infrastructure--schools, roads and transit--is sufficient to handle approval of any more of the growth proposed in the master plan for each area. In areas where schools, roads or transit is inadequate, new building projects can be approved but must pay a fee (in addition to the impact fees all development pays) to address the deficiency.

The Council has figured out the schools process, and imposes a hefty fee on new residential development in school clusters that have insufficient classroom capacity to accommodate more students. But courage failed Council members when faced with asking developers to cough up a similarly hefty fee to increase inadequate road or transit capacity.

The Council was presented with three proposed funding levels for the fees to charge new development in areas with inadequate roads or transit. The one proposed by Council staff would have collected the most money, and was roundly rejected. The one proposed by Council members Marc Elrich and George Leventhal would have collected less revenue than the staff proposal, and was weighted to collect more from new commercial development than from residential projects. It, too, was rejected. A five member majority of Council approved the funding scheme proposed by Council member Nancy Floreen, which will generate the least revenue of the three proposals and is weighted to collect more from new residential development than from commercial projects to address road or transit capacity inadequacies.

So Council members say we need adequate roads and transit to accommodate growth, but they failed to create a plan to pay the costs. And out of one side of their mouths Council members continually say the county has a need for more affordable housing. But five members just passed a funding plan for developer contributions toward needed transportation improvements that puts a greater burden on housing than on commercial development.

Speaking of affordable housing mixed messages, the Council is set to consider a rewrite of the county Housing Policy being proposed by the County Executive. The new policy contains a recommendation

to preserve areas of existing affordably priced housing. Members of Council will undoubtedly approve the new policy, and will likely use the vote as an opportunity to once again exhort the great need for affordable housing. But on September 25 the Council approved rezoning of property on Battery Lane in Bethesda on which 240 affordably priced garden apartments now exist, which will be replaced with 700 new apartments under the rezoning, 105 of which will be affordable under the county's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit program.

So on the one hand Council members will encourage the preservation of existing affordable dwellings in the new Housing Policy, yet they recently voted to reduce the number of affordable apartments from 240 to 105 on one street in Bethesda.

Mixed messages from government officials are confusing, particularly when it comes time for residents to decide whether or not to vote to reelect those officials to another term in office. The best advice is to pay attention to their actions, not their words.

County Executive Leggett says there is no money to build a bus rapid transit system. But his action is to seek \$1 million to study feasibility of building the system. Who is going to end up with that money?

Council members say it is important there be adequate transportation capacity to accommodate new development. But the action of five members of Council was to shrink from asking developers to pay a fair share of the costs of needed improvements. As a result, the burden of making up the revenue shortfall will fall on residents.

Council members say we have a critical need for more affordable housing. But the action of five members of Council was to impose the higher of the paltry road and transit improvement fees on future residential instead of commercial development, making housing less affordable.

The elections for County Executive and Council will take place in 2014. Start keeping a scorecard, voters. Question those mixed messages. Pay attention to how your tax dollars are being spent. Don't let the names officials give their policy initiatives fool you; consider what the policy actually does (or doesn't do). Tune out officials' words and focus on their actions.

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