

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Region is too congested for its own good**

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Data in the 2012 Urban Mobility Report recently released by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute shows the Washington region has the worst traffic congestion in the United States.

The report shows that commuters in the D.C. area waste an average of 67 hours a year, and 32 extra gallons of gasoline, stuck in traffic backups. The authors of the study calculate that area commuters whose trip to work would take one-half hour in light traffic ought to allow nearly two hours for the trip, to ensure they get to work on time in case they encounter a bad crash, roadway construction or other blockage on their route.

And, as if this news wasn't bad enough, the Texas A&M analysts predict that by 2020 traffic congestion costs will increase by 65 percent and the average number of hours of lost time will increase by 55 percent. That's just seven years away, folks.

Granted, things aren't as bad here as they are in some places around the globe. Take Beijing, China, for example. On many days in January of this year, the smog resulting from pollution spewed out by automobiles and factories in Beijing reduced visibility to 200 yards or less. That city experienced just five "blue sky days" in the entire month. Air pollution poses such a dire threat to human health in Beijing that merchants are selling cans of fresh air imported from cleaner provinces in China for 75 cents apiece.

Maybe things aren't expected to get that bad in the Washington region. But the authors of the Texas A&M Transportation Institute report contend that our region will not be able to build its way out of the traffic congestion problem...not by building more roads, not by providing more mass transit options, or even by encouraging more people to walk or bike to work. They opine that the only truly viable solution to the problem involves embracing more flexible work schedules that allow workers to arrive late and leave later in the day, or allowing more employees to "telecommute" (work from home).

Has the Washington region grown too much? More pointedly, have Montgomery County officials approved land use plans that allowed the county to become overdeveloped?

The purpose of zoning (the laws that regulate what uses are allowed on privately owned property, and set size limits and minimum setback standards for new building construction) is to promote the public health, safety and welfare.

But how healthy is it for commuters to sit stuck in traffic breathing auto exhaust for 67 hours a year?

How safe are we when traffic congestion is so bad that drivers can't pull over to make way for emergency vehicles, requiring ambulances, police cars and fire trucks to drive in opposing lanes of traffic when responding to calls for help?

And how does it promote the public welfare if companies refuse to locate to an area, like Bethesda or Silver Spring, because they don't want to ask their employees to commute to a location with such severe traffic congestion?

The Montgomery County Council sets the schedule for revision of area master plans by the Planning Board. And each time that the master plan for a community is revised, the density of allowed development is increased to permit bigger buildings that contain more housing units or more commercial space, or both.

If the region has already reached the point where we can't solve the traffic congestion nightmare, why has our County Council requested revision of the master plans for Chevy Chase Lake, Long Branch, Glenmont, White Flint North, Lyttonsville, White Oak, downtown Bethesda, Gaithersburg East, Aspen Hill, the Westbard and Pook's Hill areas of Bethesda, and Sandy Spring Village Center--all in the next two-and-one-half years?

Is the Montgomery County Council shirking its responsibility to ensure the land use plans and zoning which they approve serve to promote the public health, safety, and welfare?

My guess is that the push to allow greater and greater density of development stems from the flawed idea that the only way to meet the county government's fiscal challenges is to increase the number of residents and companies paying income tax, and enhance the value of properties thereby increasing the taxes collected on them.

But the fact is that if the county government can't meet its budgetary demands with the amount of revenue currently being collected, then it will forever be victim to the need for increased growth. And growth requires expanded services to support it, which requires more revenue...and officials keep digging the hole we're in deeper and deeper.

*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 [montgomerycivic@yahoo.com](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*