

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Chevy Chase Lake plan sets bad precedent**

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On Tuesday, July 30, the County Council approved the master plan for the Chevy Chase Lake area of the county, which is located on Connecticut Avenue between East West Highway and Jones Bridge Road. The process of approval and the plan itself both set bad precedents that I hope will never be repeated in future.

The first error in judgment, in my opinion, occurred when the Planning Board rejected the draft plan written by the Planning Department staff. The Staff Draft proposed a substantial amount of redevelopment for Chevy Chase Lake, perhaps more than some residents in nearby neighborhoods wanted. But it contained an increase in housing at a scale and density that was compatible with surrounding areas, and had significant community support. The Planning Board told the staff to "go back to the drawing boards" and add even more density of development to the plan.

The plan the Planning Board recommended, and sent to the Council for consideration, increased the amount of housing to 1,500 new dwelling units. And at the same time, the Board's plan decreased the overall amount of retail space in the shopping center below the amount currently there, all but guaranteeing that new and current residents will need to travel for shopping and employment opportunities which will not be provided in the area.

The second error in the approval process for this plan is one that I believe has never before occurred in the county--this master plan is not in balance. The plan does not provide adequate transportation infrastructure to accommodate the density of new development it allows. Nearby intersections along Connecticut Avenue are currently failing--that is, they experience weekday rush hour traffic levels that exceed capacity. And should these intersections get the "improvements" recommended in the plan (for instance, adding new turning lanes) they will still be in failure, given the additional traffic that will be generated by new development in this and the "upstream" areas of Kensington and Wheaton, where recent master plan revisions also added significant new density.

When the White Flint Sector Plan was being considered by Council in 2009, there was one intersection along Old Georgetown Road that was predicted to fail with levels of rush hour traffic that exceeded capacity, due in part to the enormous amount of new development allowed in the area plan. In his testimony to Council on the White Flint Plan, County Executive Isiah Leggett forcefully commented that the plan "moves away from capacity-focused principles which have been used to link growth with public facilities in Montgomery County." Unfortunately, while the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan admits there will be multiple nearby failing intersections, the County Executive has all but been silent.

Another bad precedent was set during initial consideration of the Chevy Chase Lake Plan by Council on July 23. A heartfelt request to limit the building height on a property in a critical location of the plan area, which came from Council member Roger Berliner (in whose district Chevy Chase Lake is located), was strongly rejected by most of his colleagues on Council.

Mr. Berliner fervently believed that a 75 foot height for the new retail shopping center buildings, which will have residential units above first floor stores, would insure compatibility with surrounding neighborhood development. In addition, community residents favored this cap on the height. A majority of Council members refused to defer to the district Council member's preference and approved

a height limit of 120 feet for the property, a slap in the face of the tradition of deference to district member's wishes.

Council did approve an amendment offered by Mr. Berliner during the July 30 debate, which he told his colleagues the week before that he would be presenting. The thrust of the amendment was to note that new ideas for intersection improvements could be considered, in future, in addition to those recommended in the plan.

While the Berliner amendment was expected, Council member Hans Riemer introduced a set of last minute amendments that he brazenly stated were in response to an email request he received from the Chevy Chase Land Company, a major developer in the Chevy Chase Lake area. Could this mean a nice fat donation will find its way to Mr. Riemer's campaign war chest in the near future? To her credit, Council member Valerie Ervin said she would not vote on any last minute amendments that she had not had sufficient time to consider and which had not been adequately explained by staff.

In the end, the Council approved the new Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan by a vote of 8 to 1, Council member Marc Elrich being the sole vote in opposition. Among the several significant points he noted for his opposition vote, Mr. Elrich stated, "We will be predicating our traffic assumptions on a non-auto driver mode share of 49.6 percent, despite the fact that that level is not achieved in any Metro Station area." That means that the plan assumes half of all future rush hour commutes will not be by car; an unrealistically high number even given the provision of east-west rail service when the Purple Line is built. Elrich also explained that "I have never seen a Planning Board or Council so utterly and completely disregard the community, their input and concerns, as has occurred here."

Following the votes on adoption of master plans, it is tradition for Council members to thank all those whose advice they have ignored during the consideration of the plans: the Planning Department staff, the Board, the community residents, etc. I would like to thank the one person who stood up for the residents of the Chevy Chase Lake community. Thank you, Council member Marc Elrich.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800 to 1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [montgomerycivic@yahoo.com](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*