

"Federation Corner" column
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Master plans can regulate the pace of growth
by Jim Humphrey
MCCF Planning and Land Use Chair

One of the problems the Montgomery County government has faced over the past several decades is its inability to create the infrastructure needed to support the density of development allowed in the community master plans approved by the County Council. As a result, when County Executive Isiah Leggett took office for his first term in January 2007 he noted in his Inaugural Address that there existed an infrastructure deficit.

In layman's terms what an infrastructure deficit means is that there is insufficient classroom capacity in the county schools to handle the number of public school students living in newly built housing units, that one in six intersections in the county that has a traffic signal experiences a greater volume of traffic in rush hours than it can handle, and that there is inadequate transit in the county to handle the increased number of commuters.

Unfortunately, after Mr. Leggett's first six years in office the infrastructure deficit still exists. Although, in his defense, much of the responsibility for the continued problem lies with the County Council, not with the Executive Branch of county government.

In the Federation Corner column published on August 1 of this year, I noted the failures of the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan then recently approved by the County Council. For one, prior to giving their approval the Council understood that several intersections nearby Chevy Chase Lake, notably Connecticut Avenue and Jones Bridge Road and Connecticut Avenue and East West Highway, were currently "failing" (have more traffic volume in rush hours than they can handle). Council members also understood that even after all of the intersection improvements called for in the Plan were built, it was predicted that those intersections would continue to fail.

By admitting this prediction of continued intersection failure, the Council in essence admitted that the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan was not in balance--that is, it did not plan sufficient infrastructure (road capacity, in this case) to handle the number of new housing units and amount of commercial space the Plan allows for the area. And State law requires that area master plans for all counties in Maryland be in balance when approved by the local legislature.

Another problem with the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan is that it allows 1,500 new housing units to be built, but actually decreases the amount of retail square footage in the area. This almost guarantees that those residents moving into the new housing, as well as current residents, will have to travel somewhere outside Chevy Chase Lake to do some or most of their shopping.

But one of the things this Plan did get right was the approval of a mechanism to pace when the new development could be built. This mechanism, called "staging," does allow for some new development without any added road or transit improvements having to be made, but only the amount that was already allowed under the existing Plan in place prior to the rewrite. Any newly allowed density of development must wait to be approved until the Purple Line to service the area (the segment running between Bethesda and Silver Spring) is funded and construction has begun.

Approving this staging mechanism in the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan was a wise move because it tries to guarantee that any newly approved residential and commercial development, which will take

several years to build, will likely not be ready to lease or sell until the Purple Line to service the area, which will also take years to build, is operational.

The Council approved a similar staging mechanism in the Great Seneca Science Corridor Master Plan for the West Gaithersburg area. That Plan allows a low level of development density to be approved and built prior to creation of the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) to service the area. It then allows a bit more development to be approved when the CCT segment from Shady Grove Metro to Metropolitan Grove is funded, and a bit more still when that segment of the CCT is operational.

The use of this kind of staging mechanism tied to creation of new transportation infrastructure is especially necessary in areas where there is a critical shortage of road or transit capacity. In areas that have existing Metro Stations, like Bethesda or White Flint, the Council has used a different type of staging that allows increased density of development to be approved only when the area reaches a goal for what is called Non Auto Driver Mode Share (NADMS). The NADMS for a community is the percentage of commuters living elsewhere who come to jobs in the area, and commuters leaving area homes to go to jobs located elsewhere, who travel by means other than an automobile. In the White Flint Sector Plan, for example, the final buildout of all planned development is only allowed when the area reaches a 50 percent NADMS.

Using staging mechanisms in master plans is a way of insuring that growth of development does not outpace the ability of the county to provide the infrastructure needed to support that growth.

By the way, there is a mechanism in the growth policy approved by the County Council every four years (now called the Subdivision Staging Policy) which serves to fund the school system in providing classroom capacity to keep up with the increase in student enrollment from new housing.

When student enrollment in any school cluster exceeds 105 percent of the classroom capacity on the elementary, middle or high school level, then developers of residential projects must pay a fee for every student on that grade level that will be generated by their project. At 120 percent of capacity, no new housing is approved. The student generation rates is based on housing type--single family detached or attached, or multi-family low or high rise--and is calculated each year based on actual number of current students living in each form of housing.

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