Smart growth: county should lead by example
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In Part One of this column ("When Smart Growth Isn't," February 20, 2014), we looked at smart growth and infrastructure. This month, we will consider whether or not the government agencies that are pushing smart growth practice what they preach.

As citizens, we are constantly being admonished to give up any notions of human-scaled neighborhoods with treed yards and ample green space. Planners talk about the county's "suburban character" as if it was an embarrassing social disease.   We are told that (with the exceptions of the Ag Reserve and multi-million-dollar estate homes) Montgomery County will become one vast high-density mixed use development. Anyone who questions this vision is labeled as a dinosaur that just doesn't get it.

So what does smart growth mean for government facilities? One key aspect is co-location, where different agencies share a building. This is not a new idea. In the 1980s, when I lived in Minneapolis, Hennepin County had regional services centers where you could go to get any needed permits, or to sign up for different government programs. (Although Montgomery County has what are referred to as regional services centers, most of them just house a regional coordinator and meeting rooms.)

There are many benefits to co-location. For example, in Prince George's County many of the recreation centers are co-located with schools or senior centers. This allows government to save money by building a single facility (like a parking lot, auditorium, or gym) that is shared by both entities. And this kind of co-location is also convenient for residents. They don't have to travel out of their neighborhood, so people can walk or bike to the recreation center. It also lets you do several things with one stop. For example; Mom can work out in the gym while Daughter is at soccer practice.

Unfortunately, Montgomery County seems to have what Civic Federation Executive Committee member Jim Zepp calls "an edifice complex"--each agency demanding its own free-standing building. In addition, in recent years, many agencies have moved away from small, local facilities to mega-scale regional facilities, like recreation centers where the building itself occupies over an acre of ground and is surrounded by a two hundred to four hundred car parking lot.

So even as residents are scolded for not embracing transit-oriented development, the county is closing walkable neighborhood facilities and investing millions in large drive-to facilities.

In Prince George's County, by contrast, there is a mobile recreation program that brings roller skating, skate boarding, and video games right into underserved communities. Instead of hundreds of people driving to the recreation center, a truck brings the recreation to them. This allows that county to serve many more people than they could with brick and mortar facilities. Prince George's also has other mobile programs, such as low-cost health screenings and even mobile veterinary services.

Montgomery County is finally taking its first baby steps toward co-location with a planned combined Wheaton library, recreation center, and county's new Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission headquarters in Wheaton. (Some employees from the Department of Permitting Services and Department of Environmental Protection will also be housed along with M-NCPPC.)

Environmentalists and local leaders are telling the agencies that their design needs to go beyond code compliance to embody a community-based green design that honors the diversity of Wheaton's small businesses. But sadly, we're still a long way from government leading by example.

In the Planning Board's discussion of its new headquarters, the Board was bemoaning the fact that it would need to give up a couple of staff parking spaces for the Park Police cruisers. So I'm guessing that we are still a long way off from true inter-agency integration or from Planning Board members taking public transit to work.   (Here too, Prince George's County is ahead of the game with its new one-stop permit and licensing center which, when completed, will house staff from nine different agencies.)

Therefore, until Montgomery County government and the Planning Board truly walk their talk, it is unlikely that they will be very convincing in selling smart growth to the public.

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 the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com