

"Federation Corner" column
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Season of campaign promises upon us again

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June 24, Primary Election Day, is approximately ten weeks away. And the chorus of promises resonating from the campaign trail is beginning to rise in volume, with incumbents and wannabes fighting for attention from Montgomery County voters. So this might be a good time for county residents to recall a key issue that faced us four years ago, and one which we still face today--the impact of new construction on worsening traffic congestion.

Polls conducted by the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun earlier in 2009 had showed growth and traffic congestion to be leading concerns across the state, but particularly in Montgomery County. County Executive incumbent Isiah Leggett said he would push to reinstate "policy area review," which used formulas to determine whether communities were too overwhelmed by traffic to accommodate new development. The developer friendly majority of a previous County Council, the self-labeled End Gridlock slate, had eliminated the process in 2003, with backing from former County Executive Doug Duncan.

In November 2007 the members of the last Council instated a new policy area transportation test. However, Leggett objected to it saying it "provides results that do not accurately reflect actual transportation capacity, is difficult to understand and thus is not transparent to County residents," a sentiment echoed by many civic activists. It took the County Executive until March of 2010--two and a half years--to transmit to the Council his recommendation for an improved process.

To his credit, County Executive Leggett and his staff persisted for an additional two and a half years, working with the Planning Board and Council until the Transportation Policy Area Review (TPAR), a more realistic appraisal of the ability of transportation facilities to accommodate additional growth, was adopted in November 2012. But the new TPAR tests do not provide a means to stop approval of new development projects in areas where traffic or transit capacity is inadequate. The tests only allow for the imposing of added fees in such instances. And the Council consistently votes to limit the amount of money collected from new development (fees which would be used to fund needed infrastructure), especially in Metro station areas.

The majority of current Council members believe that holding development fees in transit station areas to a minimum provides an incentive to focus growth in those areas and prevents sprawl. In reality, however, residential development in the county's Agricultural Reserve and so-called "large lot" rural areas continues unabated, since it is allowed under current zoning for those areas.

As Council member Marc Elrich has stated, the only way to prevent sprawl is to rezone and reduce the amount of development allowed in rural areas. Instead, the current County Council has approved rewrites of master plans for six communities: Wheaton, Kensington, Takoma/Langley Crossroads, Chevy Chase Lake, Long Branch, and Glenmont. These revised master plans all increased the allowed amount of development, growth that will occur in addition to rural sprawl. And the justification for densifying three of these communities--Chevy Chase Lake, Long Branch and Takoma/Langley--is that they are so-called smart growth "transit centers" along the proposed Purple Line alignment, although it is not likely that this transit system will be built to service these areas for at least fifteen years.

Thank goodness this Council shares the citizens' concern about growth (that's sarcasm, my boy). Think what a pro-development Council could have approved!

Yes, this is the season for campaign promises. Voters are already hearing that most candidates for County Council support "protecting neighborhoods," whatever that means. And most candidates have announced that they are "progressive," in an odd attempt to mix together support for multiple issues--such as transit-oriented development, affordable housing, and protecting the environment--under this now adulterated label. But voters should be wary of promises made by politicians from the shaky platform of the campaign stump. Even when campaigners replace meaningless generalities with specific promises, their commitment can only be proved by their actions following election to office. And then it's too late, if voters realize they've made a mistake. We're stuck with our electoral error in judgment for the next four years.

Once in office, our elected officials sometimes conveniently forget the promises they made while campaigning. And sometimes it is not so much a matter of forgetting their promises as it is one of making unrealistic claims regarding the timing of their fulfillment. The Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT)--a rapid transit facility planned to link Clarksburg, Germantown and the Great Seneca Science Corridor to the Shady Grove Metro station--has been promised to the residents of the upcounty for decades now. Right around the time of the General Election in November 2010, the state Transit Authority held public outreach meetings which gave residents the impression that the start of construction on the CCT was just around the corner. Three and a half years later, officials seem to be no closer to locking down funding and starting construction on the CCT than they were in 2010.

Those running for office for the first time are an unknown quantity, a true pig-in-a-poke for voters. At least incumbents have a record in office on which voters can make a judgment. But whether incumbent or newbie to the political arena, politicians will continue to make promises which I suggest the voters take with a grain of salt, as the saying goes...a very large grain of salt.

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