

“Federation Corner” column

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Old data in the 2014 report

By Jim Davis

On October 7 of this year, staff from the Planning Department's Transportation Division presented the 2014 Mobility Assessment Report to the Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee of the County Council. The problem with calling it the 2014 report is that it contained the same data on levels of traffic congestion at county intersections as that which appeared in the 2013 report released last year.

The 2013 data showed one in eight intersections had more traffic volume in afternoon rush hours than their capacity could adequately handle. Has that improved (not likely) or worsened in the year since? The 2014 report cannot provide that answer by reprinting year old data.

I need to provide readers with a history of the Mobility Report, in order to explain why I think it important that the Council get the most recent traffic congestion data issued in the report each year.

In the 1990s and before, the County Council approved an Annual Growth Policy in the fall of each year. The AGP set a limit on the number of new housing units, and amount of retail and office space in new commercial buildings, which could be approved by the Planning Board in the following year, broken out for each area of the county. Once the limit for new housing or commercial space in a given area was reached the area went into moratorium, and the Planning Board was not allowed to approve any more of that type development for the area until the Council approved more capacity.

To assist the members of Council in calculating the amount of new development to allow, the school system provided the amount of classroom capacity remaining for each county public school and the Planning Department released a report then entitled the "Annual Development Approval and Congestion Report," containing morning and evening rush hour traffic counts for county intersections that have traffic lights.

By the early 2000s the Council was still enacting what was called the Annual Growth Policy, but it was only being approved every other year in the odd-numbered years. And in 2003, Council members who comprised the incongruously named "End Gridlock slate" did away with growth moratoria based on traffic capacity, allowing the Planning Board to approve new development in any given area that exceeds the area's road capacity, provided the developer pays the county an added fee in addition to the usual impact taxes. The Council did retain moratoria on new housing for areas where enrollment in the elementary, middle or high schools exceeds one hundred and twenty percent of classroom capacity.

In 2005 the old "Annual Development Approval and Congestion Report" was renamed the "Highway Mobility Report," to rebrand it with a more positive sounding title ("Congestion" is such a negative word, don't ya think? "Mobility" makes it sound like rush hour traffic is actually moving.). But the report still contained a list with traffic counts for morning and afternoon rush hours for the county's signalized intersections.

Next, in 2009, the Council voted to replace the bi-annual Growth Policy with a newly titled "Subdivision Staging Policy," which is approved every four years in the second year of each Council term. The first was enacted in 2012 and the next will be approved in 2016 (which should give voters enough time to forget how badly Council members mangle the growth policy before heading back to the polls for the next county election in 2018). And the new Subdivision Staging Policy continues the grand tradition of allowing more new development than the traffic will allow, so long as an added fee is paid.

In 2011 a rebranding of the "Highway Mobility Report" took place, with the name being changed to the "Mobility Assessment Report." The newly titled report was expanded to contain data on transit usage as well as pedestrian and bicycle counts for a limited number of county intersections, although I am not convinced of the value of the new data.

Even if transit ridership were shown to exceed capacity I am not sure capacity could be increased at present (for example, by decreasing wait times between buses on a RideOn route), due to the dismal lack of state and county transportation funding. And what use can one really make of data on numbers of pedestrians and bicyclists?

What a great many residents and workers in this county care about is whether the levels of vehicular traffic congestion are improving or worsening, and the probable basis for the change. The end of this year, for example, the county will likely see a decrease in transit ridership and increased usage of owner occupied vehicles, due to falling gasoline prices (Who wouldn't rather commute to work in their own car than sit on a crowded bus or Metro car during flu season?)

The changes in levels of traffic congestion I am concerned about are not seasonal or transient, but long-term increases caused by allowing more growth in the county than our roads can handle. Or it may be occurring due to traffic from outside the county, generated by new growth taking place in neighboring jurisdictions.

Our Council members need to monitor the levels of traffic congestion in the county by being provided reliable traffic data annually, especially now that they will only enact a new growth policy, or Subdivision Staging Policy, once every four years. But reports on traffic levels should also be a means of informing Council members as to the wisdom of their revising master plans, and rezoning properties to increase the density of allowed development, in overly congested areas of the county.

In this age of cloud-based data storage and manipulation it is possible to generate a new list of traffic levels for the county's signalized intersections every year. But this just might require the Planning Department to hire a low-level clerk to input the data, with position funding added to the budget approved by the Council.