

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **A growth test no one can fail...or understand**

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I think most county residents are concerned about the amount of new construction going on at the same time that traffic congestion gets worse and hundreds of classroom trailers--er, I mean "learning cottages," remain in place to cope with school overcrowding. I know my neighbors in Bethesda are mad as can be that planned construction will shut down Woodmont Avenue for up to two years, while more development projects are being reviewed for approval that will hamper traffic flow on the only other two north-south roads serving our community.

County Councilmembers, meanwhile, have spent the past few months quibbling over the details of a growth policy test that none of them really likes or understands and which, as far as I can tell, does not stand a chance of preventing more and more development from being approved. The growth test being proposed by the Planning Board this year balances road congestion against availability of transit--Metro and RideOn buses, Metrorail and MARC--to calculate whether large areas of the county can accommodate more growth. This Policy Area Mobility Test (PAMR or "pammer," as it has been named--government officials love their acronyms, don't they?) is so complicated that one Councilmember exclaimed they would need a PhD to explain it to their constituents.

Some members of Council asked the Board and its staff to explore alternatives to PAMR, but Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson refused the request. Councilmembers asked how the roads test and the transit tests could be separated into two stand-alone tests. "It is not what we're recommending," was Hanson's reply. President Praisner asked for information on how the Council could go about reinstating capacity ceilings, a process of setting limits on the amount of commercial development and number of new housing units the Board can approve each year that worked well until abolished by the last Council in 2003. Hanson replied, "Why would we give you that information? We don't think it's a good idea." With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, you serve at the pleasure of the Council, not the other way around.

In 2005 the Planning Board under then-Chairman Derick Berlage had a pretty good idea for a simplified process of regulating growth. They recommended a 1% growth rate, which would have meant that in the upcoming year the Planning Board could only have approved projects that included a total of 3600 new housing units and enough retail and commercial space to allow creation of 5800 new jobs. Then these totals would have been distributed between the 28 county planning areas based on the infrastructure improvements that were going to be funded in each area within the next four years. In addition, a school cluster capacity test and local intersection congestion test would have been applied to each project seeking approval, to insure that small localized areas were not overwhelmed by too much development.

Under the 2005 plan that proposed a 1% growth rate compounded annually, the ceilings for the year 2029 would have been 4400 new dwelling units and enough commercial space for around 7000 new jobs. One of the attributes of this plan was that by the year 2030 we would have created just the number of new dwelling units and jobs that was predicted by county officials in a regional growth forecast exercise. The problem was the plan was easy to understand, promised to effectively slow growth so infrastructure could catch up, and stood no chance of being approved by the pro-development majority in the last Council.

As stated earlier, the PAMR test being recommended this year by the Planning Board under Chairman Hanson stands no chance of stopping more and more development from being approved. That is because even in areas where there are inadequate roads and inadequate transit, the Board could still approve

projects by requiring that developers agree to traffic mitigation agreements. The Council has made changes around the edges, to tighten up the test and require a greater percentage of mitigation in certain cases. But, the glitch with the scheme is that there is no data to support the notion that mitigations--such as developers providing bus shelters or bike lockers near their projects, or selling reduced price transit passes--will result in a reduction in the amount of traffic generated by new development, certainly not in the long term. And it will require vigilance and extra personnel to monitor those few agreements that might require an actual traffic reduction target to be met.

So now, having hemmed and hawed for the last four months since the public hearing in June, the Council is running up against a self-imposed November 15 deadline for action on the growth policy. In a memo to Council last Tuesday, County Executive Ike Leggett showed himself to be the lone voice of reason in a sea of confusion by stating that he did not want to see PAMR approved in any form. DPWT Deputy Director Edgar Gonzalez represented Leggett in asking that the Council instead work with the Executive and the planning staff over the next six to nine months to come up with a growth policy that is "transparent, easy to understand, and that better relates to master plans." The master plans for the county's 28 planning areas are, after all, the documents that recommend increases in residential and commercial development and also specify infrastructure improvements to support added density. Our master plans address the "what" and "where" of adequate public facilities to support planned increases in housing and jobs, and the growth policy is supposed to provide the "when" by pacing the rate of approval of new development.

Karl Moritz, head of the M-NCPPC Research and Technology Center, once characterized the old Annual Growth Policy, which was in place from 1986 to 2003, as "a complicated system of measurements and standards that only a few people fully understood." It looks like the Council is poised to take us from bad to worse.