

"Federation Corner" column
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Are we reaching the limit on growth?

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This is the first in a planned series of columns looking into growth related issues.

For years the County Council, County Executive and Planning Commission have bought into the argument that the county must continue to grow in order to have an expanding tax base to pay for the programs and services demanded by our residents. The Civic Federation believes that new homes and the families living in them cost the County a good deal more each year for the schools, firefighters, police, libraries, community centers, recreation programs and parks needed to support them than they contribute through combined income, property and sales taxes. It is a vicious circle. There is never any end to growth in sight and, therefore, no end to the need for costly new infrastructure to support growth.

Even more disheartening is the frequently cited argument that Montgomery County must compete with Fairfax County. No one stops to ask if the county's residents want this kind of competition or if we want to live with the growing congestion, urbanization, air pollution and scramble for fundamental resources like space and water? Do we want to compete in what often feels like a race to the bottom?

At a June 30 joint meeting of the county's Board of Education and the Planning Board--the first such meeting since May of 2009--the topic was growth and how to find the space needed for more schools. The meeting was precipitated by the proposal made to the Board of Education, by the Site Selection Advisory Committee for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), to essentially "grab" the 17-acre Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park and use it for a second middle school in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase school cluster.

The school site selection process was a disaster because two of the three major stakeholders, the Park & Planning Commission and staff and the local community, had been effectively excluded from the Advisory Committee's final selection process. The announcement came as a bombshell causing both an explosive backlash in the local community and understandable bad feelings within the Parks Department and the Planning Board. Another site was subsequently selected by the Board of Education.

MCPS staff kicked off the meeting with a compelling review of the facts about MCPS student enrollment. Since 1958 the County has built 54 new schools, all on sites owned or dedicated to MCPS use. This half century of new school construction was required first to accommodate the "baby boomer generation" which swelled public school enrollment beginning in the early '50s and extending through the '70s. After that, growth in enrollment and new school construction focused on the up-county in fast growing Rockville, Gaithersburg, Germantown, Damascus, Olney and Clarksburg.

Demographic planners expected enrollment to grow during the economic boom years and thought it would slow during recessions. In fact, the opposite has happened. With the State mandate for full-day kindergarten in 2006, each elementary school suddenly needed more classrooms and desks. And when the current recession hit in 2008, people started pulling their children out of private and religious schools, which had served 19% of students in the county,

and sending them to public schools. MCPS had accommodated 81% of the county's grade school students, but now educates 86% of them.

Then there is our birth rate. On average the county gains thirty-seven newborns a day, or 13,500 prospective kindergarteners each year. And the Office of Economic Development continues to push for more jobs and more residential units to house the workers arriving to take up new employment.

Some will ask if we don't have enough school capacity in our older communities to accommodate growing enrollment. This might have been so but for several factors. MCPS made the policy choice some years ago to close a number of the small neighborhood elementary schools and redistrict them into larger elementary schools saying that larger schools with higher enrollments could qualify for "more programs".

Some of the older and smaller public schools, which were deemed "under enrolled" following the passing of the baby boomer population bubble, were closed and have been leased out, used for office space by MCPS, or transferred to other entities of county government like the Department of Housing and Community Affairs or Department of Parks. Still other former public school facilities were sold to private institutions. These include a public school in Silver Spring sold to the Chelsea School; the Larchmont Elementary School in Kensington purchased by Grace Episcopal Church; and Peary High School, which was sold to the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy.

The Federation objects strongly to the sale of MCPS properties precisely because undeveloped tracts of land large enough and suitable for school construction are rare. Even if such sites exist, acreage in the down county is too costly for the school system and the taxpayers to buy.

Between 2008 and 2011 MCPS enrolled 6,300 additional students. An unexpectedly large amount of this growth was in the down-county where aging empty-nesters were moving out and being replaced by younger families with school-age children. Other older residents, either by necessity or by virtue of the comforts and pleasures of living in a multi-generational household, were making space in their homes for adult children and grandchildren to move in. The Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster is now the most over-enrolled cluster in the county.

And as if this weren't enough, MCPS demographers and planners project an additional 10,000 students to enroll in the school system during the next five years? Where will we find the classroom space for these children?

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 theelms518@earthlink.net