

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Lost: one growth policy**

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Please help. Our growth policy has been missing since 2003. It was always a little scrawny, but it was the best we had. If found, please return to Montgomery County. No reward offered--we can't afford one.

In 2003, a majority of the members of the County Council eliminated the growth policy for Montgomery County. Up to that time, new development projects could only be approved if the Planning Board determined there would be adequate infrastructure--roads, transit facilities, schools, police and fire stations, etc.--to accommodate the number of housing units or office and retail jobs that were created in the space added by the new projects.

In the 1990s the Annual Growth Policy, as it was then known, was approved by the Council every year. By 2003 it was only being approved every other year, in odd numbered years. In each cycle a calculation was made of the number of new housing units and jobs that could be accommodated over the ensuing two year period. And when enough new development projects were approved to absorb the capacity in a given policy area, then the area would go into moratorium. This meant no more projects in that area could be approved until the next cycle and only then if more infrastructure could be funded and built in the area to accommodate further growth.

Former Council member Howard Denis used to say, "It's not annual and it's not much of a growth policy, either." Still, as I previously stated, it was the best we had.

Councilman Denis was correct in stating it was not much of a policy on growth. No one had ever dreamed of asking what the appropriate scale for the county--total number of jobs, households and population--might be. Then as now master plans are revised on an ongoing basis, with more and more density being allowed in each planning area whether there is any hope of funding the infrastructure needed to handle that amount of growth in the next few decades or not.

The county process for deciding the appropriate amount of growth is non-existent. It's a little like throwing darts at a blank wall and telling everyone you're hitting the target. We don't have a clue what goal we are aiming at, or whether the amount of growth that's planned is sustainable.

In 1987 the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development declared that sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" or without damaging the environment. Although a sound economy requires development, including vigorous business activity, it doesn't necessarily require expansion of community size.

You would think in one of the richest counties in the U.S. with one of the highest percentages of residents with advanced degrees we could figure out what the appropriate scale was for the county. As is true of any island, Montgomery County has a fixed amount of land. And there is a maximum number of people that amount of land can handle. It's called the carrying capacity.

But let's get back to how we lost our so-called growth policy. In 2003 the pro-growth forces of the Council were in the majority. And the majority voted to eliminate the growth policy, so it was open season on the

Planning Board approving as many new development projects as wanted to go ahead with construction. As then Council member Steve Silverman said, "I didn't get elected to keep moratoriums in place."

Jump forward to 2007 and a newly elected Council reinstated the bi-annual growth policy. But the new test they devised to determine the adequacy of transportation facilities in each area weighed the capacity of roads against the capacity of transit facilities. Under that test, the Policy Area Mobility Review (PAMR), an area can have overly congested roads in rush hour as long as the transit is considered adequate. Or it's okay for an area to have lousy levels of transit service if the roads are considered adequate to handle rush hour traffic.

This year the Council has the opportunity to institute a new set of tests for adequacy of roads and transit as part of the growth policy or the Subdivision Staging Policy, as it was renamed in 2009 (read 'subdivision' to mean 'new development projects'). In 2009 the Council also changed the approval of the policy from a two year cycle to one occurring every four years.

The new roads test will measure how fast traffic is flowing during afternoon rush hours compared to the posted speed limit. If it's within acceptable limits, then new projects can be approved for that area over the next four years. If the actual traffic speed is less than acceptable, new development can still be approved but must to pay an added fee to be put toward improving the area's transportation infrastructure. The same basic approach will be used for the new transit test, too.

The Subdivision Staging Policy must be approved by the County Council by November 15 of this year, and will be in effect until the second year of the next Council in 2016. Actually, it really doesn't so much stage or control the pace of approval of new development projects as allow all that seek it to get Planning Board approval and go forward with construction. But if tests determine the area in which a project is planned has inadequate roads or transit, or schools, the project goes forward only after paying an added fee.

It seems Montgomery County will still not have a growth policy. But we'll have a really effective process for allowing all of the growth planned for each county community to be built, and charge more to the projects located where infrastructure is lacking. As I said at the start...please help. Our growth policy is missing.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*