

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - July 11, 2013

As jobs and households increase, the numbers don't add up

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If you listen closely, every once in a while a gem of an idea can be heard amongst the roar of words cascading from the mouths of our elected and appointed county officials. Such was the case a few months ago when I heard Council member Marc Elrich (D.-At Large) publicly state his belief that a county bus rapid transit (brt) system, if created, should not be used to justify greater volume of new development, but rather to provide relief for worsening traffic congestion on our roads.

Unfortunately, other officials are already salivating over the prospect of increased revenue to county coffers which could be generated from additional households and jobs created in new development they envision at each stop along brt routes that have not yet been approved.

Two weeks ago a senior Council advisor floated the idea that, if and when a brt system is built, the level of what is considered acceptable traffic congestion should be raised for each intersection near a planned stop. One would only propose such an idea in order to lower the standard in the county's incredibly lax "traffic test," which new development projects must pass to receive approval for construction.

It is too bad that some truth drug cannot be secretly added to the public water system in Rockville. Most county officials would then have to shed all pretenses that proposed public transit systems like the Purple Line, brt routes or the elusive Corridor Cities Transitway are actually being planned to alleviate traffic congestion. In fact, most new transit will create greater levels of traffic congestion by facilitating approval of ever increasing volumes of "transit oriented development," which government officials will try and convince the public is a good and worthy objective.

"Transit oriented development" is being touted by planners as that which not only focuses housing within a half mile radius of public transit centers, but also provides the employment and shopping opportunities and entire array of public services needed by the residents in that housing, all of which can be accessed by walking or biking...no pesky automobiles needed.

But, as the late Planning Commissioner Jean Cryor said to a former Planning Department Director (who shall remain nameless), "I don't know what world you come from, but in Montgomery County we don't all go to school, shop, work and die within a half mile of where we live. We use cars."

The old belief, quietly held by many county officials over the past several decades, was that if traffic congestion was allowed to get bad enough then people would leave their cars at home and take public transit. That didn't work because, just like the frog placed in cold water slowly heated to scalding, the public didn't react by leaving their cars in their driveways and walking or biking. Instead they adjusted to ever increasing road congestion by finding less traveled routes off the main roads or shifting their vehicle trips to non-rush hours.

The newly floated theory is that if the county doesn't allow adequate parking in redeveloped transit centers, then citizens will soon realize they must take public transit or spend their lives driving around looking for a space in an insane parking version of musical chairs. This idea of decreasing the amount of allowed parking will likely not catch on because developers understand that market

expectations must be met in order for them to achieve maximum profit, and folks purchasing or renting housing or commercial space will demand sufficient parking.

What do I mean by my assertion that the numbers don't add up? Well, if public transit is really being proposed by most officials in order to justify increased volume of new development, and that new development is being planned in order to generate increased revenue to the county, then somebody's math is flawed. Take for example a proposed redevelopment project envisioned for a property in Chevy Chase Lake, an area for which a revised master plan is currently being considered by Council.

One recommendation was that this project should be allowed a 150 foot building height, while nearby residents believed that a 75 foot height would be more appropriate. The property owner asserted their project would not be economically feasible with less than a 130 foot building height. And, for whatever reason, a majority of members of the Council's Planning committee decided 120 feet was their recommended height.

On Tuesday, when Council considered the new zoning to apply, someone asked what would be lost if the proposed building's height was decreased from 120 feet to 75 feet. Since the upper floors will be for residential use, the answer was that 75 fewer housing units would be created. Then somebody else asked whether those 75 housing units, if created, might not be a net revenue loss for the county, considering the number of school age children that might live in the new units and the cost of providing public education for them.

Now, nobody ran the numbers for the Council during their session last Tuesday. But it turns out that the county now spends around \$13,000 per year to educate each public school student. And if 20 percent of the units had one student each then the 75 units would generate 15 new students, costing the county \$200,000 per year. The county would have to capture at least \$2,665 a year in revenue from each of those 75 planned households in order to break even on the cost of educating the 15 new students living there. And we haven't begun to consider the cost of the other services the county provides, or wants to provide, to residents...like enhanced public transit service.

Residents have endured an infrastructure deficit for decades because the numbers don't add up. And officials refuse to admit that if they cannot meet current expenses with current revenue, then added revenue from growth is not a solution because growth requires additional infrastructure expenditures.

The theory of holes applies here: when you're in a hole, stop digging. Instead, the Council is set to allow addition of 2 million square feet of new development and 1,500 more housing units in Chevy Chase Lake, along already congested Connecticut Avenue.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800 to 1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com