

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - January 30, 2014

County still trying to catch up to growth

by Jim Humphrey
MCCF Planning and Land Use Chair

There is a kitschy saying in Pennsylvania Dutch country that's printed on pot holders and tea towels for the tourists to purchase: the hurrier I go, the behinder I get.

It seems that the Montgomery County government is stuck on the same kind of hamster wheel when it comes to providing services and infrastructure (roads, transit, schools, etc.) to accommodate the ever-increasing number of businesses and households in the county.

The Council keeps allowing more and more development in each community master plan they approve, presumably with the tacit agreement if not encouragement of the County Executive. The hope is that new businesses and households moving into redeveloped areas will generate increased revenue to provide needed infrastructure and services.

But for decades now, since the Duncan administration and before, the county has been playing catch-up--encouraging growth that will bring in new revenue tomorrow to pay for the infrastructure needed to accommodate yesterday's growth. And, of course, the new growth then requires an even greater level of services and infrastructure to support it. To borrow a favorite saying from the politicians' handbook, our officials need to apply the rule of holes: "when you're in a hole, stop digging." In this case, stop growing, at least until you figure out a better solution than the one that's failed for the past few decades.

When I first became involved as a civic activist twelve years ago, back when Doug Duncan was County Executive, the county had a serious infrastructure shortage. We needed some new roads and added lane capacity on existing ones, some new schools and added classroom capacity in existing ones, and other new government facilities, too. This was part of the legacy Duncan left his successor, current CE Isiah Leggett, when Ike took office in January of 2007. But insufficient infrastructure was not the only problem dumped on Leggett. The existing infrastructure had not been properly maintained for decades.

The late Council member Marilyn Praisner was instrumental in creating the Infrastructure Maintenance Task Force, which she headed until her death on February 1, 2008. The first annual Task Force report, published in early 2007, concluded there was a twenty year backlog of infrastructure maintenance projects: buildings with peeling paint, leaking roofs, broken heating and air conditioning systems, cracking sidewalks, deteriorating bridges, roads with potholes, etc.

What does this infrastructure maintenance backlog mean, and how can it eventually be eliminated? First the County Executive and Council would need to appropriate sufficient funds in each annual budget to pay for maintenance and refurbishing needed to keep up with that year's wear and tear on the infrastructure. AND if they then appropriated another like amount, equal to the annual maintenance budget but dedicated to reducing the backlog, they would have eliminated one year from the backlog. (I'm not sure how big it is now, since I haven't seen a Task Force report since 2010.)

In essence, our officials needed to spend double the amount of an adequate annual maintenance budget for a twenty year period, in order to eliminate the twenty year backlog of neglected maintenance projects. Of course, you readers will remember the failure of Lehman Brothers and near collapse of the world financial system that occurred in 2008, the first year the county should have dug its heels in to tackle the infrastructure maintenance backlog.

But near financial collapse didn't stop our Council from continuing to revise one master plan after another, allowing an enormous increase in the number of new businesses and households in at least twelve county communities since this new century began. Since 2001, the Council has approved revised and expanded master plans for Olney, Shady Grove Metro station area, Germantown, the Woodmont Triangle area of Bethesda, White Flint, Great Seneca Science Corridor (west of Gaithersburg), Wheaton, Kensington, Langley Park Crossroads, Long Branch, Chevy Chase Lake, and Glenmont.

In that same period since 2001, the government has provided some new schools and expanded some others (with funding assistance from the State), built some government buildings (notably the new courthouse and Executive Office Building annex in Rockville), built some new roads (primarily the InterCounty Connector highway and Montrose Parkway) and added lane capacity on a few others, and rebuilt a new bridge or two on county roads (still no transit for Clarksburg, though). Officials also bit the bullet and bought some RideOn buses to replace older ones that kept bursting into flames.

Even though County Executive Leggett, when he took office in January of 2007, admitted there was insufficient infrastructure to support existing development, he has not been able to reduce the deficit as much as he would have liked. We do need to cut the guy some slack. After all, when he assumed office in 2007 the county faced a \$200 million budget shortfall for the following year, another gift left him by Doug Duncan, which he dealt with handily. And he had that nasty financial collapse to cope with in 2008 and the ensuing slow economic recovery,

But why is the Council still approving increasing amounts of development in still other communities of the county? We know the revenue generated by the last twelve years of growth hasn't been enough to properly address the infrastructure deficit and maintenance backlog. Still, the Council has set the Planning Department to work on new master plans for the White Oak area, downtown Bethesda, Sandy Spring Village, the Pook's Hill area of Bethesda, Aspen Hill, and White Flint II (area north of Montrose Road to the Rockville City border).

The truth is that if county officials cannot balance the budget, paying all necessary expenses with the amount of revenue currently received, then generating revenue from new growth won't help meet those expenses. New growth requires additional infrastructure and generates its own bills. The hurrier you go, the behinder you can get. We in Montgomery County know that from experience.

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 the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com