

"Federation Corner" column
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County Council out of touch with reality

housing changes near enactment

by Jim Humphrey

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Using a cry for affordable housing as a shield, the "End Gridlock" slate of Councilmembers is proposing to weaken nineteen residential zoning categories by increasing the density and decreasing open space if projects contain Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDUs). The zoning text amendments, as they are called, will for example allow 100% townhouse development in areas zoned for quarter acre and half acre currently protected from such growth and in downcounty single-family detached home neighborhoods. Normally one expects mostly detached dwellings with the small number of MPDUs being townhouses. These ZTAs will also increase the building size and density, and decrease the open space and community and play areas, of new garden apartment projects as well as high rise housing in Metro Station areas. One piece of legislation will also eliminate our master plans from being considered when land use decisions are made. This set of legislation is the newest and most dangerous attack the Council has fostered on the citizens of the county.

Consider the other attacks

In the 2002 county election, a majority of Council members were elected on a promise to solve the traffic congestion problem. The group of five Council candidates endorsed by County Executive Doug Duncan--consisting of At-Large members Silverman, Floren, Leventhal, Subin and District 2 Councilmember Knapp--ran as the "End Gridlock" slate. It has been a while since that last county election. Now is a good time to ask ourselves, "Are we better off in Montgomery County than we were in 2002?"

What have the "End Gridlock" members of Council done to solve the traffic problem? They eliminated from the Annual Growth Policy the ability to place areas in a moratorium, the method used to regulate the pace of approval of new development. The Council took this action in October last year, two months after the Planning Board, the experts in the field of land use planning in the county, finally admitted after years of denial that "our roads and schools do not have the capacity to adequately support additional growth." So, ask yourself, "Is traffic better or worse in my area since the 2002 election?" As in most communities in the county, drivers in your area are coping with noticeably worse levels of traffic congestion.

Another area where growth has been allowed to outpace infrastructure is in our schools. We now have over 720 trailers in school yards across the county, up from 687 last year, because school construction has not kept up with the rate at which new housing is being built. Ask yourself, "How many trailers sit in school yards in my community?"

The brakes have been removed and we now have no way to slow the rate of growth in Montgomery County. Add to this the fact that homeowner property taxes have increased at nearly double the rate of inflation in each of the last three years, and our income tax has risen from a rate of 50% of the amount paid to the State up to 60%. Now, ask yourself, "Am I better off now than I was in 2002?"

The Arrogance of the Council

Last fall, an unprecedented number of citizens testified before Council against the County Executive's Plan for Economic Development, stating the rate of growth that the plan recommended was too high. The Planning Board--again, the experts that the county has hired to advise us on land use planning matters--recommended a growth rate one-half of that proposed by the Executive. The Council chose to ignore the citizens and the Planning Board and approve the Duncan plan. But, because the Council had dismantled the brakes that could regulate the growth rate, over the past year new construction has been approved at almost double the high rate opposed by the citizens and Planning Commissioners last October.

Montgomery County has one last tool we use to plan the rate of growth in specific areas--the master plan process. Every ten to fifteen years, residents of each area of the county work with the Planning Board revise the vision for the future for their community. Master plans impose zoning on specific properties and serve as a guide for allowable development. But over the past year or so, after residents have finished rewriting their area master plans, the Council has revised them to increase allowable levels of commercial and residential development.

First, it was the Upper Rock Creek area plan that was changed to add density after the citizens had finished revising that plan. And, this is a semi-rural area where increased density may have a severe negative environmental impact. At present, density in the Olney and Shady Grove plans is being increased. Next, the Council will move on to add density to the Germantown, Damascus and Twinbrook plans that are currently in rewrite. Then it's down to south Bethesda and the Westbard plan, where dozens of acres of light industrial property are already being targeted for high density residential development.

Make Your Voice Heard

In the next week or so, the Council will vote whether or not to approve the MPDU ZTAs. If you think the pace of growth is too fast in your area, if traffic congestion is only getting worse, if your children deserve to be educated in a bricks-and-mortar school room and not in a trailer, then make your voice heard. Write the County Council, 100 Maryland Avenue-6th Floor, Rockville MD 20850. Or, you can send an email to county.council@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Tell the Council that you're fed up with the pace of growth in the county, and urge them to disapprove the MPDU ZTAs!