

"Federation Corner" column
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Traffic capacity test for development approval is flawed

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A majority of the Montgomery County Council voted in October 2003 to strike down the process for regulating growth that had been in place for many years. Although it contained many flaws, that process allowed the Planning Board to assess the infrastructure in each area of the county every two years. They could then recommend "ceilings" for the maximum new commercial development and the number of dwelling units that could be approved over the ensuing twenty-four months. The purpose of the process was to insure that there was sufficient road and school capacity in each area to accommodate new growth before it was allowed to take place.

When the Council abolished the "ceiling" element, a mechanism by which the county could place an area in building moratorium, it left in its place two capacity tests which must be met before any new building project can be approved. The first is the Local Area Transportation Review (LATR), which is a test for roads, and the second is a greatly improved but still somewhat flawed schools test. A previous Federation Corner column explained the school capacity test and its remaining flaws ("School Capacity Numbers Don't Add Up," December 2, 2004).

The LATR sets acceptable traffic volume limits for the 750 or so signalized intersections throughout the county. These limits allow the highest traffic volume in Metro station communities and the lowest in rural areas. However, capacity is not calculated just for an intersection as it exists today. It is also based on changes approved in the Capital Improvements Program for that intersection for up to four fiscal years in the future. Regardless of whether we will have money in the budget to actually fund the road improvement when the time comes, growth can be approved today based on the "promised" capacity increases.

Let's say a developer proposes a project on a road between two signalized intersections. In considering approval of the project, the Planning Board and its staff must first determine the "promised" capacity for these two intersections and sometimes for several beyond them. Then a consultant hired by the developer counts the current traffic volume and adds in traffic that is expected to be generated by other projects that have already been approved in the area but not yet built.

The consultant then uses a chart from the Planning Board's LATR Guidelines to calculate the number of vehicle trips that would be generated by the proposed development during both the morning and evening peak hours. The chart is based upon nationally collected data that indicates the number of vehicle trips each type of development will generate.

The developer's consultant then splits the expected traffic between the two intersections. If one of the intersections exceeds capacity, the overage is simply sent to the other intersection if it has spare capacity. If both nearby intersections exceed their capacity, one might think this would result in the project being disapproved, but this is not necessarily the case. The developer is allowed to "buy down" the number of vehicle trips generated from his project by agreeing to steps that are intended to reduce the amount of traffic his development is adding. These steps include either making improvements to the nearby intersections or providing certain amenities to encourage walking, biking or use of public transportation. The amenities can include building a bus shelter, installing an electronic schedule board in an existing shelter, installing bike racks, or constructing a sidewalk to a bus stop.

One of the problems with the LATR process is that follow-up is not always required to determine whether the amenities resulted in the predicted reduction in traffic. Another flaw is that traffic limits have been set so high for some intersections that they may exceed their actual capacity long before the formula limit could be reached.

A study has been done of the actual traffic that developments have generated at an intersection compared with the amount predicted by the LATR. It showed the LATR produced reasonable traffic forecasts for at least six years and in some cases as long as ten years. The LATR does not account for traffic at intersections that is generated from developments at a greater distant, which is what the "ceiling" structure attempted to address. As a result, traffic builds over time producing many congested intersections. The Council needs to fund both the "promised" and other planned road improvements so that congestion does not develop.

The 2004 Annual Development Approval and Congestion (ADAC) Report, issued by the Planning Board last July, showed nearly one-fourth of the intersections sampled--79 out of 320--had traffic that exceeded the LATR standards during the morning or evening peak hour or both. Yet, since the County Council reformulated the growth policy in October 2003, no proposed development project has failed to receive approval because it could not pass the traffic capacity test.

In a report to the Council in August 2003, the Planning Board warned that "our roads and schools do not have the capacity to support additional growth." They went on to state that "to effectively implement the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, the (growth policy) should use a definition of 'adequate' that conforms with the reasonable expectations of most County residents." This admission that congestion exists is the first time the Planning Board and Council have arrived at the same conclusion that the rest of us reached long ago. Those who travel our county's roads can only hope the Council heeds the advice of the Planning Board and reformulates an effective traffic capacity test that requires recognizably adequate roads before more growth is allowed, or congestion will worsen for years to come.