

"Federation Corner" column
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The vicious circle of growth

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In the past month a series of three Federation Corner columns focused on discussions between the Board of Education, Planning Board and County Council on the need to find sites for new county public schools that will be required to accommodate the expected increase in population. But the expansion of infrastructure which will be needed to accommodate growth involves much more than new schools. Let's look at Clarksburg as an example.

Clarksburg was touted as the last area available for "greenfields development" in the county, which in layman's terms means that most of the new Clarksburg was built on farmland that was previously undeveloped. Clarksburg was hailed as one of the "diamonds in the tiara" of the county's Agricultural Reserve--the string of town centers including Olney, Damascus, Clarksburg and Poolesville that span the northern tier of the county which is theoretically reserved for agricultural use and as rural open space.

But decades ago officials imagined Clarksburg as a rural goose that could lay a golden egg for the county. They could stick tens of thousands of new homes in the area, the owners of which would all pay property taxes and income taxes to the county government. It was, the officials believed, a mother lode waiting to be mined.

Here we are decades later with nearly 20,000 new housing units in Clarksburg. And what are the costs? Growth has required a new high school and middle school, and another elementary school is planned. A public library is proposed for the Town Center subdivision, but the area also needs a permanent home for a fire department and police substation (although officials didn't have the foresight to require developers to donate land for these public safety service facilities). And nearly 20,000 more housing units are planned to be built over the next twenty years or so.

Clarksburg and the rest of the town center "diamonds" stretching across Council District 2 are home to twenty-three percent of the total of employed residents in the county, but District 2 is home to only ten percent of the jobs. So each weekday morning thousands of these workers clog I-270 and MD 355, commuting to jobs downcounty or out of the county...and seventy-eight percent of them drive alone in private vehicles.

These residents are heading to jobs elsewhere because the jobs they were promised in Clarksburg have yet to be created. And they're commuting in their own vehicles because the Corridor Cities Transitway--the promised mass transit line that justified Clarksburg being called a "transit dependent community"--is still decades from being built and available for use.

And Clarksburg is not what you would call a "walkable and bikeable" community, even if there were jobs and retail shopping opportunities in the area to walk and bike to. The eighteen or so new subdivisions on the east side of I-270 have internal sidewalks built by the developers, but the county has not provided public sidewalks linking the subdivisions to one another or to the public schools or Town Center. Now that's good planning (he said, sarcastically).

I'm not making this stuff up, folks. It's all in the "Montgomery County Snapshot" published by the Planning Department in July 2010.

Germantown, the closest neighbor to the south of Clarksburg, eclipsed it by growing even more in the past decade. That expansion has already required a new fire department, and the new development allowed by the 2009 Germantown master plan revision has not yet begun. New schools and other infrastructure are sure to be needed there.

Downtown Bethesda has 12 residential buildings approved but unbuilt, totaling 1400 dwelling units. Using Montgomery County Public Schools student generation rates for high rise apartments, those projects when built will house 160 public school students, 60 of them elementary students. MCPS is already planning a second middle school in the cluster. And the school all new elementary students will attend, Bethesda Elementary, needed two classroom trailers the day it reopened after renovations ten years ago, and now has four "classroom cottages" as they are euphemistically called. Bethesda is slated to get a new police station, too.

Hundreds and hundreds of new housing units have been built in downtown Silver Spring in the past decade, with hundreds and hundreds more planned. A new Civic Building recently opened there, and ground has been broken for a state-of-the-art new public library. This library will join the other new that one opened a while ago in Rockville, and the major renovation of the Olney Library. And the Purple Line light rail or bus rapid transit system planned to link Bethesda to Silver Spring (and beyond, to Langley Park)? It is decades away.

As to crime, in Bethesda there were 14 robberies, 4 assaults, and 3 thefts from vehicles in the month of June, as reported on the website crimereports.com. The Police Department reports that in Silver Spring over the past 12 months there were 77 street robberies, 26 assaults involving a weapon, and 545 calls for fights in progress. These numbers are just for the two downtowns, and not the residential neighborhoods surrounding them. Yet the county can only afford to give Silver Spring three new policemen from this year's graduating class. And factor in the cost of the new courthouse in Rockville, needed to handle the increase in trials.

I haven't even mentioned other infrastructure needed to support growth, such as parks, recreation programs, and other government services. Does growth really pay? Or are our officials continually planning more new development to create additional revenue to pay the bills for the infrastructure needed to support yesterday's growth? The way to break the vicious circle is for the County Council to take a hiatus from revising master plans. There are already 105,000 to 115,000 dwelling units that could be approved and built under existing zoning in master plans.

Why not try replacing phrases like "leading the nation" and "winning the future" with "holding the line on taxes" and "living within our means"? At least for a while.

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