

"Federation Corner" column
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How good land use plans go bad

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Last Tuesday, July 29, the County Council approved the White Oak Science Gateway Master Plan. And the rose-colored glasses eight of the members were wearing as they adopted the Plan could not have been thicker.

As we have seen time and again in the past, the Council once again approved a land use plan that might provide adequate infrastructure (in this case two routes of a bus rapid transit (brt) system on Route 29 and on New Hampshire Avenue) if everything goes just as planned...if the Plan actually creates new jobs and not just more housing on the side of the county that has experienced a decades-long glut of housing with few jobs...if the planned jobs and housing actually generate enough new tax revenue to pay for the needed brt routes...if, if, if.

Even when plans are successfully implemented in terms of the number of new dwelling units and jobs created, as is the case with the Clarksburg Master Plan, the county has time and time again failed to provide the needed supportive infrastructure. In the case of Clarksburg, the missing infrastructure is the Corridor Cities Transitway light rail system that the residents of the new homes in Clarksburg were promised when they purchased and moved into their homes well over a decade ago. And it's not like the county didn't have time to figure this one out...the CCT has been in this area's master plan for over forty years. And they're still waiting for construction to begin.

One of the ways the Council has of insuring that supportive infrastructure is built at the same time as new development in an area is by provided staging in the master plan. The Planning Department and Council staff recommended that staging be included in the White Oak Science Gateway Master Plan which only allowed a set number of new homes and jobs to be created before the brt was funded, and a slightly higher number before the brt routes were actually built and operational. Even the Maryland Department of Transportation sent a letter encouraging the Council to include staging..

The Planning Board did not recommend staging in the Plan, but took a slightly different approach by making the transportation tests each new development project must pass so strict as to require the brt be built before much growth occurred in the area.

The County Council rejected both of these ideas and, instead, and eight members voted to weaken the transportation test applied to each new development project under the county growth policy (now called the Subdivision Staging Policy). They did this by referring to the White Oak - Hillandale area as an "urban area, the equivalent of a Metro station area or central business district." The only problem is that this area does not have a Metro station or Purple Line light rail station, nor does it have the grid system of local roads seen in central business districts, a fact pointed out to his colleagues by Councilmember Marc Elrich to no avail.

So now the Subdivision Staging Policy transportation test has been so weakened that no new development project in the White Oak Plan area could fail to pass. And the second

transportation test, the local test applied when a project seeks Preliminary Plan approval, will not stop new project approvals either.

As we have seen in the White Flint area, all the developer needs do to receive approval if their project fails the local area transportation test is to pay money into a fund to make road improvements in the area. Yet for all the money that White Flint area developers have thrown into this area's fund, the county still does not have enough money to go forward with the critical "boulevard treatment" for Rockville Pike which would separate local traffic from the pass-through traffic that streams down MD 355 all day, every day.

Great Seneca Science Corridor is another example of a recent master plan approved while the Council members were wearing rose-colored glasses. And so, as it is being implemented, the Council is surprised and shocked to discover that almost no new science and tech jobs are being created in this west Gaithersburg area...just thousands and thousands of new housing units, the residents of which must get in their cars to commute to work every morning because the Corridor Cities Transitway planned to whisk them to work each day is years and years away from groundbreaking.

The recent Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan is yet another land use plan recently approved by Council that relies on the CCT to get employees to any new jobs created in the area. And, again, the CCT is years and years from being built and operational.

And yet the Council time and time again approves new levels of development density in master plans for community after community in the county. And time and time again the county government has failed to provide the transportation infrastructure to support the allowed density.

When they approved the White Oak Science Gateway Master Plan on Tuesday, Council members were fully aware that the tax revenue generated from new jobs and residents in this area will not be sufficient to fund the creation of the two bus rapid transit routes needed to serve the area, and they have no clue as to what funding mechanism will be needed. But they shut their eyes, plugged their ears, held their noses and approved the Plan anyway.

The US Army has an acronym for this type of behavior--SSDD, which stands for "same stuff, different day," except instead of "stuff" they use another term for excrement.

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 montgomerycivic@yahoo.com