

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - August 5, 2010

Election season reality check on growth and transit

by Donna Baron

Coordinator, The Gaithersburg-North Potomac-Rockville Coalition (online at www.scale-it-back.com)

Many of the County Council candidates have the same message, repeated over and over...the need for more space for more jobs, all justified by an overly ambitious forecast of transit use. Perhaps a reality check could help form the basis for more credible campaign promises.

The current County Council has approved huge amounts of added density in the master plan revisions for Twinbrook, Germantown, White Flint core, and the Great Seneca Science Corridor ('Science City'). And more master plan rewrites are in the works for Kensington, Takoma/Langley, Wheaton, White Flint II, Chevy Chase Lake, Long Branch, Glenmont, East County Science Corridor, Battery Lane, and Gaithersburg East.

County officials justify these rewrites because, by 2030, the County is expected to add another 250,000 people which will require more jobs and homes. Allowing for 2.5 persons per household, 100,000 more dwelling units will be required. And at the targeted rate of 1.6 jobs per household, 160,000 more jobs will be needed to accommodate those new residents.

However, 105,000 to 115,000 dwelling units can be approved under the current zoning in the master plans in place, meeting the housing needs of future residents.

As to jobs, the July 2009 data from the Planning Department show that the commercial space available in the pipeline (approved space, not yet built) is 25 million square feet. An additional 40 million square feet could be approved under the current master plans. Councilmember Phil Andrews mentioned earlier in the year that the vacancy rate in the Gaithersburg-Germantown area alone was 26 percent, leaving many area business owners with available space. At the Candidate Forum in Germantown on July 12, Councilmember Marc Elrich remarked that the vacancy rate across the county has resulted in 17 million square feet of vacant commercial space. These statistics should be reflected in the other candidates' messages as well.

The Planning Department rule of thumb is that one new job can be created for approximately 300 square feet of available commercial space, depending on the use of the space. When the supply of vacant and buildable commercial space is tallied up, approximately 82,000,000 square feet of commercial space could be available which would accommodate over 270,000 new jobs. Even if only 75% of the space is suitable or is built, that amount could still accommodate over 200,000 jobs, more than enough for the influx of people expected by 2030.

What is the point of the Council continuing to approve greater density in master plan revisions, when the currently available and buildable space will accommodate the future residents through 2030, and the money for supportive infrastructure projects (like the Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitway) will likely not be available from the county, the state or the federal government for years to come?

The principles of smart growth support the improvement or repurposing of existing space in areas where the infrastructure is already in place. The proposed infrastructure required to support the massive amount of development approved for the 'Science City' alone will cost over \$2 billion. And the Corridor Cities Transitway is expected to carry only 12 to 15 percent of the additional population in this area, leaving 85 percent of planned residents and employees in their cars...requiring wider roads and eight to ten phenomenally expensive multilevel highway interchanges.

We all agree that transit is essential in order to control traffic congestion. But transit cannot be used as an excuse for approving ever increasing amounts of density. As long as subdivisions are built with twists, turns and cul-de-sacs, transit use will continue to be light. Residents cannot get out of their subdivisions without their cars so where will they put their cars once they get out of their neighborhoods?

In order to make transit work in many parts of Montgomery County, gigantic parking lots and garages must be built at each transit station as well as a sufficient feeder bus system to bring riders to the stations. Transit works best in areas that have been coherently planned and built with a straightforward street grid with intersecting streets...not twisting knots of dead-end streets or isolated pseudo-grids in small areas.

In addition to the problems with the convoluted configuration of the road network in the county, the “walking and biking to transit or work” concept is often not practical in the Washington area because the weather is freezing, sweltering, icy, rainy, snowy, slushy, blowing or completely uncertain. This is not San Diego.

In order to be credible, the candidates must start with reality. Approving more space for more jobs based on an overly ambitious forecast of transit usage will not help our current situation and it does not reflect realistic expectations for the future. We need innovative strategies to attract new businesses and help small businesses expand to create jobs to fill currently available space and improve our existing communities, recognizing that transit is a necessity but not a cure-all for approving too much density.

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