

Federation Corner column
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It's the traffic, stupid

by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

An ever-growing coalition of residents who live near the planned new Science City is actively opposing the density of development being proposed in the revision of the master plan for their community. Their website, www.scale-it-back.com, lists support from residents in over 70 communities and homeowner associations. Of primary concern to them is the amount of traffic that would be generated if the County Council approves another 5,800 housing units and 13 million more square feet of commercial space (enough to generate 40,000 new jobs) to be built in the area. Rush hour traffic is already bad in this area which lies to the west of both Rockville and Gaithersburg, the second and third largest cities in Maryland.

This past Tuesday, April 6, the full Council held its first worksession on the proposed revision of the Science City master plan. Unfortunately, it appears at least four members of Council have adopted a paternalistic attitude that they know best what is good for this community and the county, and have decided to turn a deaf ear to residents' concerns. However, they did decide it was important to rename the plan.

Originally referred to as the Science City Master Plan, that label was jettisoned by county planners last year because of concern that inclusion of the word "city" in the title would generate opposition from residents in the suburban subdivisions encircling the plan area. It was renamed the Gaithersburg West Master Plan.

The Mayor and Council of Gaithersburg City, which have both formally objected to the level of density being proposed in the plan, registered their displeasure with the "Gaithersburg West" label. They opined that the name incorrectly suggests their city is responsible for the plan; but the plan area is outside city limits, in an unincorporated area over which the county has land use and zoning jurisdiction. So, on Tuesday, some County Council members laughingly renamed it the Great Seneca Corridor Life Sciences Center Master Plan. A flawed plan by any other name...

The name of the plan is not the problem. In a twist on the 1992 Clinton campaign slogan about the economy, what the residents living in Gaithersburg, Rockville and North Potomac are saying is "It's the traffic, stupid."

Even if the fabled Corridor Cities Transitway (which has been in the master plans of communities along the I-270 corridor for the past 40 years) is ever built, 70% of residents and employees are expected to use their personal vehicles to commute to and from the Science City...er, Great Seneca Corridor Life Sciences Center area. That calculates to a possible 32,000 additional cars on the road in this area, at buildout of the plan. Critics of the scale-it-back residents' coalition claim that those objecting to the proposed density are posing a worst case scenario, and usually only 75% of the density allowed in any master plan is ever built. Okay, so the revised master plan will only generate an additional 24,000 cars on the road in this area during morning and evening rush hours.

The scale-it-back coalition claims the plan's prediction that traffic in the area will move at around 9 miles an hour during rush hour is unacceptable, and since this is an average speed then traffic in the predominant flow direction will move significantly slower. During the April 6 session, Planning Department staff pointed out that the 9 mile an hour speed was calculated on a higher density scenario which is no longer being recommended. They claim under the current proposal the average speed will be closer to 10 miles an hour...that is, if the major road improvements they recommend are actually built.

The plan calls for up to 6 grade-separated intersections on area roads, at a cost of around \$150 million each. At the same time, however, the Council has decided that creation of life sciences jobs is so critical to the economic well-being of the county that developers of new bioscience buildings will not be charged the transportation impact tax that is levied on all other development projects in the county. Any increase in county revenue from creation of life sciences jobs, then, will come primarily from property and individual income taxes paid by job holders, not from the corporations or universities that will profit from the development. Well, that ought to be a real help to the county government's current fiscal crisis. But remember, the state and Federal government will undoubtedly help pay for road improvements and the Corridor Cities Transitway...they're awash in extra money these days, ya know.

Unless convinced otherwise, the "Grow to Gridlock" clique on the Council will probably prevail and approve the Science City Master Plan, claiming we need the plan to stay competitive in the race to attract high-quality jobs. If we keep this up, the county could just economically develop itself into bankruptcy. The advantage for county officials is that residents will no longer have time to complain--we'll be stuck in traffic.

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