

"Federation Corner" column  
Montgomery Sentinel - March 25, 2010

### **This scheme will return**

*Failed attempt to facilitate development in so-called "urban areas" will be tried again*  
by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use

This past Monday, March 22, a colleague of mine who lives near the location of the planned new Science City attended a County Council committee worksession on the rewrite of the master plan for that community. The Science City area, referred to as Gaithersburg West, is actually southwest of Gaithersburg and northwest of Rockville, and outside the city limits of both these municipalities.

This colleague called to ask me if I knew why the members of the Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee had been discussing whether or not to designate Gaithersburg West as an "urban area" at their session on Monday. "There is nothing urban about the area," they said. They are right.

If you drive around just outside the Gaithersburg West master plan area, you will see cul-de-sacs and dead-end streets with single-family homes branching off Muddy Branch, Dufief Mill and Darnestown Roads. It would be impossible to connect these outlying subdivisions to the planned Science City core area. The only thing that will be urban is the level of density proposed for Science City. While there are 7.9 million square feet of commercial space currently in the area in retail, office and laboratory space, the area is targeted for 20 million square feet of commercial development. To put that in perspective, it's the equivalent of four and half Pentagons proposed to be plopped down in the middle of what, until ten or fifteen years ago, had been a rural area with cow pastures.

But, I explained, to understand the possible reasons for applying "urban area" status to Gaithersburg West, you have to dig a little. First, you need to understand that the designation is applied to areas by County Council resolution. The resolution approved in December of 2007 designated Clarksburg, Olney and Damascus as "urban areas," as well as areas that are actually more urban in character such as Montgomery Hills and the Long Branch area just east of downtown Silver Spring.

Then, to understand why communities in the county are designated as "urban areas," I told my civic activist colleague, you need to look at the development standards that are applied, or are planned to be applied, to these areas. The key is what standards are planned to be applied in future. And for that, you need to look at the amendments to the county growth policy that were being drafted by Planning Department Director Rollin Stanley and his staff over a year ago.

In early 2009, the scheme was being hatched by the Planning Department to apply what were called Sustainable Development standards to areas named as "emerging districts," like the Gaithersburg West or Science City area. We know the light rail Corridor Cities Transitway is not likely to be built to serve Gaithersburg West for 15 to 20 years, so the area does not merit high density and relaxed project approval standards as a "transit center." So planners felt another designation--that of "urban area"--could allow for more dense development, reduced impact taxes, and expedited review of development plans

Under the growth policy, in areas of the county that have inadequate road capacity or transit service, new development is required to mitigate vehicle trips that would be generated by a planned project. For example, in layman's terms, if you are planning to construct an office building that would bring 100 new jobs to an area that has inadequate roads or transit infrastructure, you might be required to mitigate a percentage of rush hour vehicle trips which might result. This means the developer would have to come up with a plan to eliminate some rush hour trips, perhaps by offering to sell reduced price transit passes, agreeing to a

ridesharing target, or paying a fee equivalent to \$11,000 per trip. The money, at least in theory, would be used by the county to improve the road capacity or transit service in that area.

In "urban areas," where planners determine that residents have access to at least 10 basic services within a half a mile of their homes--such as a grocery store, dry cleaner, restaurant, coffee shop, or government services like a post office--they proposed that developers only be required to mitigate, or eliminate, one-half of the number of vehicle trips currently required. This, they felt, would be a financial incentive for developers to build in areas where residents could walk or bike to shopping and basic services without using their cars. It may sound like a good plan in theory, but areas like Clarksburg, Damascus, Olney and Gaithersburg West currently have lousy transit service (in Clarksburg and Damascus, the average commute by transit takes twice the time of the average commute by car). The result of the planners' scheme would be that the county government would collect less revenue from new development in these areas, revenue that is needed to improve transit service. Fortunately, the Planning Board rejected the idea and did not forward it to the Council for consideration.

As with so many poorly thought out government ideas, however, the scheme to facilitate high density development in so-called "urban areas" will probably return in some altered fashion. In a report on the growth policy filed with the Planning Board on January 20, 2009, Planning Department staff stated "Some of these (ideas) may need to be 'cooked' for a longer period, perhaps the next review of the Growth Policy in 2011." So I told my colleague that they should be wary of the Council designating Gaithersburg West as an "urban area," because the planners will likely return in 2011 with their scheme to increase allowed density, relax project approval standards, and reduce development impact taxes on projects in areas with that designation. My guess is that the scheme would create traffic gridlock and worsen the fiscal situation for the county government, resulting in higher taxes for us all.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*