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Montgomery Must Slow Down to Catch Up

by Phil Andrews

Excessive growth in Montgomery County is choking roads and overcrowding schools. These issues drove the 2002 local elections and remain the principal threats to the county's high quality of life.

When the County Council decides the Annual Growth Policy this fall, the only reasonable option is to "slow down to catch up." Continuing or increasing the current pace of development will only exacerbate traffic congestion and school overcrowding.

Most county residents share this view. A recent poll found that only one percent of county residents think the county is growing too slowly. However, the powerful development industry -- which provided about half of all campaign contributions in the recent Council elections -- demands faster growth and more density almost everywhere. The Council's duty is to take the broader view and to act in the public interest, to be pro-people even at the risk of upsetting those who profit from growth while leaving taxpayers with the bill.

Politically-generous developers have been lobbying councilmembers for months to approve more development than roads and schools can support. Community leaders have been reminding councilmembers that the last election turned on the issues of congestion and school overcrowding, not on too little growth. The very real need for more affordable housing should not be misused to leverage excessive highly profitable market-rate housing development that worsens traffic congestion and school overcrowding. The affordable units will expire in time, but the excess development will last forever.

In its proposed Annual Growth Policy, Montgomery County's Planning Board has recognized the obvious: county roads and schools are at or are over capacity. The Board recommends an increase in the modest development impact tax for transportation, and a new development impact tax for school facilities similar to a measure that Councilmember Tom Perez and I proposed this spring.

The Board also advocates permitting the most efficient land-use to move forward first, such as mixed-use development at Metro stations, and taxing such development at a lower rate than development in areas not well-served by transit. This should reduce car-dependent sprawl development.

The Board recommends a one percent growth limit for new jobs and housing, and eliminating the schools test and policy area transportation review used to determine whether schools and roads have capacity to handle more development.

As the Board acknowledges, however, the one percent limit would not apply to a large pipeline of already approved development -- 77,000 jobs and 24,000 housing units -- and cannot apply to the federal government and to municipalities, including Gaithersburg and Rockville, which have independent development authority. The limit also would not apply to affordable housing projects – limiting growth in this way will not affect affordable housing in the least.

For these reasons, actual growth would likely be two to three times more than the one percent target proposed by the Planning board. A two percent annual increase in housing units equals the addition of 50,000 new residents in three and a half years—a population the size of the City of Rockville.

County schools cannot absorb the 7,000 additional students that a population increase of 50,000 would generate. School overcrowding cheats our children. And portable classrooms are no kind of long-term solution.

Development should be postponed from going forward if it will cause local school overcrowding. We need to tighten the school capacity test so that it reflects actual conditions in the school, not junk it altogether as the Planning Board proposes.

County growth policy must reflect that traffic congestion and school overcrowding are the most serious problems facing our county. Anyone who says they are concerned about traffic congestion and school overcrowding but votes to increase development opportunities for politically-connected developers is playing fast and loose with the voters' trust.

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Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg) represents District 3 on the Montgomery County Council which includes Derwood, Gaithersburg, North Potomac, Rockville and Washington Grove.