"Federation Corner" column
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Draft 2014 Mobility Assessment Report released
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The staff of the Planning Department's Transportation Division presented their draft of the 2014 Mobility Assessment Report at the April 17 meeting of the Planning Board. The Board's approval is required prior to transmitting the report to the County Council. But before delving into the current report, I will share a bit of history on the topic.

Prior to 2005, the report was entitled the Annual Development and Congestion (ADAC) Report. In it, the Planning Department informed the Council of how much new development had been approved by the Planning Board over the past year, and reported on whether traffic congestion had improved or worsened over the same period.

The reporting was broken apart for the various county planning areas. The report facilitated the Council process known as setting the Annual Growth Policy, which limited the number of new housing units and jobs (defined in amount of commercial square footage) that could be approved by the Board for each area of the county over the following year.   Or, alternatively, the Council could place an area in moratorium to stop Board approval of more building projects, thus preventing added new jobs or housing units from overwhelming already strained transportation infrastructure or schools.

In 2005 the Council renamed the ADAC Report the Highway Mobility Report, probably to give a more positive branding to the analysis of county traffic congestion. And the developer friendly majority of the Council, the self-labeled End Gridlock slate, eliminated moratoria as part of the Growth Policy, with the backing of former County Executive Doug Duncan. This allowed development approvals to go forward in all areas of the county, and simply imposed added fees on developers who wished to build in areas with insufficient infrastructure.

The following year, in 2006, the Council changed it to a biennial report to match their new two-year cycle for approval of the county Growth Policy. However, as one former County Council member was fond of stating, the gutted Growth Policy no longer controlled growth and wasn't much of a policy, either.

Starting in 2012, the Council decided to approve new Growth Policy (now renamed the Subdivision Staging Policy) only once every four years, in the second year of each four-year Council term. And, although most new development projects seeking Board approval still receive it, a moratorium on approving additional residential units is imposed if a project is in a school cluster where enrollment is 120% or more of capacity on the elementary, middle or high school level.

Also in 2012, the Highway Mobility Report was renamed the Mobility Assessment Report, and it was expanded to include transit ridership, bicycle usage and pedestrian data, in addition to road and intersection traffic congestion data.

The draft 2014 report states that only 11% of the county's signalized intersections with reported data are failing, down from the 16% failure rate reflected in the 2012 report. Although there are 760 or so signalized intersections in the county, planners only included those with traffic count data no more than three years old. So only 627 intersections are included in the 2014 report, and 72 of them are

said to be failing (that is, they have more traffic volume in AM or PM rush hours than they have capacity to handle).

It is puzzling, however, that on the chart included in the report showing the 50 most congested intersections, five of them do not receive a failing grade. There are only 45 failing intersections listed, while the report states there are 72 failing ones in the county. What is the location of the 27 not listed? Unfortunately, that information is included in one of the 4 Appendices to the report, none of which are currently available on the Department's relevant webpage-- www.montgomeryplanning.org/transportation/.

A pet peeve of mine is this kind of inconsistency in the reporting of facts. Another example is that the draft report states that data on 627 intersections is included. But in their memo transmitting the report to the Board, the Planning Department staff notes that data on 625 intersections is included in the report. I could double-check the number for myself by looking in Appendix 4 of the Report but, as I stated above, it has not yet been made available on the Department website.

In the past, the former head of our Planning Department's Science and Technology Research Center, Karl Moritz (who now works in the Alexandria, Virginia Planning Department), used to include traffic count data more than three years old in the Highway Mobility Report for failing intersections where no improvements had been made. His reasoning was that these intersections had been failing and there was no change in their configuration, so it could reasonably be assumed that they were still failing. This was not done by planners in the current report, probably to mask the total number of failing intersections by not including data on over 130 of them.

Personally satisfying to me is the fact that 26 of the 50 reported failing intersections show greater traffic volume in AM rush hours than in PM hours. For years, I have been told by transportation planners that weekday afternoon rush hours are far busier than morning hours. So I must point out that 14 of the 45 failing intersections included in the report failed in AM rush hours only, and not in PM hours.

The data concerning transit ridership, bicycle usage and pedestrian crosswalk counts is, in my view, poorly explained. And, since staff only began collecting these data sets for the last report in 2012, no long term trends can be shown and few valuable conclusions can be drawn.

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