

Bulletin Board

A BOARD MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

By Lisa Freeman, South Riding Board of Directors

Alas, summer vacation is over. While we welcome the cooler temperatures of fall, things are heating up in Leesburg for the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors. On the table are several controversial comprehensive plan amendments (CPAMs) for the Dulles South area.

Wading through the facts, opinions, and emotions of local area development is challenging, and the stakes are high. It is my hope that the South Riding Board of Directors will step into the fray, and take a position for the benefit of South Riding residents. In my opinion, the Dulles South CPAMs are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for this area, and too good to pass up. At stake are significant local road improvements, job and retail opportunities, schools, a university, a regional park, and a hospital.

The State of Virginia, specifically the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is responsible for building and maintaining roads in Virginia. After many years of poor planning and not properly prioritizing the spending on transportation, we find ourselves with a backlog of needed new roads and road improvements, and no money to pay for them. Both Democrats and Republicans want to blame each other for causing Northern Virginia traffic woes, while at the same time, want to claim responsibility for solving them; to date there has been political gridlock.

The VDOT 6-year plan (www.virginiadot.org/-infoservice/news/is-6YrImp2006.asp) includes \$21 million for preliminary engineering studies and right-of-way acquisition to widen Route 50 from Poland Road to Route 28, but no construction costs, which are estimated to be approximately \$27 million. No other Dulles South road improvements are in work, unless you count the nearly \$18 million being used on traffic calming measures west of here in Aldie, Middleburg, and Gilbert's Corner.

So how do we provide significant, long-term funding for road improvements that are regionally fair? That is above my pay grade to solve, but here are a number of proposals that have been made at the state and county level, most of which involve your pocketbook:

- Reallocation of funds in the current state budget
- Pushing responsibility back on counties, unfortunately without sending back state tax revenue to pay for this new responsibility. Right now, for every dollar in income taxes sent to Richmond, Loudoun County gets a return of approximately 20 cents. We already spend this on other things, so we would need to get a significant increase for Loudoun County to get into the road building business.
- \$1 billion in state income tax increases
- Increased county property taxes. The Loudoun County Board of Supervisors recently approved a fall referendum to determine if residents are willing to increase their property taxes to allow the county to improve an intersection on Route 7 and fund 5 additional road studies. I view this as double taxation, since we already pay income taxes to the state to fund VDOT.
- Tying road development to developer proffers to solve local transportation problems. This approach has been essentially the way almost all road improvements in Loudoun County have been funded for the past 20+ years. Proffers are financial contributions made to the county and designed to mitigate or offset the infrastructure needs of planned development. They are used to pay for public schools, public safety, road improvements, parks, libraries, and other public services.

This brings me to the Dulles South CPAMs, which could provide \$750+ million in local road improvements at no cost to taxpayers...that is huge! The Route 50 Task Force (of which I was a citizen member) made a number of recommendations to improve the efficiency and attractiveness of the Route 50 Corridor including building "collector" roads parallel to Route 50 to offload some of the

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more local traffic and consolidating and reducing access points along Route 50. If the CPAMs are approved, these improvements can be implemented in 4-5 years, most before any new house is occupied. If they are not approved, and the land is developed by-right, we won't have the land and right-of-ways available to develop new roads and make road improvements.

These CPAMs bring a host of other opportunities:

- **Schools** — developers are offering to not only site new public schools, but to build them. That will save taxpayers money and allow children living in the new communities to attend schools that have been located within the communities, a goal most parents' support. With by-right development changes in school boundaries are more likely to affect the existing planned communities of Stone Ridge and South Riding.
- **George Mason University** — GMU proposes to build a full campus here, including a performing arts center and recreation center much like their Manassas campus.
- **A regional park** — a 200-acre regional park is being offered; the county has no plans in the near future to build a regional park in this area.
- **Shopping (boutique and big box) and restaurants** — a major consideration when businesses justify opening a new store in an area is a sufficient population base. Additional by-right development may limit the business opportunities in this area.
- **A hospital** — last year the Board of Supervisors approved a CPAM on Healthcare, which anticipates the next hospital in Loudoun County being located in the Dulles South area. Inova has plans to build a healthcare facility in this area, but expansion of this facility into a hospital also relies on a sufficient population base.
- **Local area jobs** — with the additional commercial square footage being proffered many Dulles South residents will be able to work locally and reduce the amount of traffic going out of the area. A stronger commercial tax base offloads the tax burden of property owners.

That all sounds good, but what about that flyer I got on my mailbox? It says that by-right development is the way to go; that these 28,000 homes are going to cause my property

taxes to go up? First, for those that don't know, let me backtrack and explain that by-right development occurs when property owners choose to develop their land based on current zoning ordinance. In our area that is typically one home per acre. By-right development provides no proffers to help pay for public schools, public safety centers, new roads or road improvements, parks, libraries and other support services. Some examples of communities that were developed by-right include: Blue Springs, North Riding, and Providence Ridge. South Riding, which was planned in the mid 1980's, is built at an average of 4 units per acre and included significant proffers to the county.

Ok...back to the flyer. The PEC (Piedmont Environment Council) and their splinter lobbying groups will tell you (massaging county staff data) that by-right development is the way to go, that planned development will cause our property taxes to go up. By contrast, a report from Robert Charles Lesser & Company, a leading independent real estate consulting firm out of Bethesda, shows that new houses in planned developments in our area are at a price point that produces a net fiscal benefit to the county. I believe that special interest groups have made the numbers say what fits their mission. Behind their scare tactics of higher taxes and traffic gridlock, is a mission to keep out any more houses at any cost. I believe the PEC's real agenda is to protect lifestyles of wealth and leisure at the expense of suburban taxpayers. To me it has been the by-right development around South Riding, which has brought us the most detrimental impacts to our schools and transportation with no proffers for local road improvements and schools.

But didn't I just read in the paper that VDOT did a study that tells us that these 28,000 homes will cause total gridlock? I liked what Prince William County Chairman Sean Connaughton said to the Leesburg Today about this situation, "What are they [VDOT] going to do when 28,000 homes are built not with this specific project, but spread throughout Northern Virginia?" He strikes at the heart of this entire debate. Anyone who thinks that stopping the development of these homes in Dulles South over the next 20 years will keep a bad traffic situation from getting worse is fooling himself. It will still get worse, because over the next 20 years the houses will STILL get built somewhere to meet the demand from all the people that are moving into our area for jobs.

Don't believe me? Just go to the Metropolitan Council of Government's website (www.mwcog.org) to see the good news: thousands of jobs, homes, and people projected not

just for Loudoun County, but all the counties in the DC metro area. Why are they coming here? Good jobs! Thankfully, we have a wonderful economy here in this area. No-growth advocates would perhaps do better telling the Federal Government and all the area employers, including Dulles Airport, to stop hiring people. I don't think that is even remotely possible.

We have 20 years to fix our current transportation problems and plan for this growth that is coming. Yes, that might mean higher taxes. These CPAMs cannot fix the entirety of Northern Virginia's transportation problems, but they can help us out here in Dulles South with local road improvements, job and retail opportunities, schools, a university, a regional park, and a hospital. I believe we need to see beyond the short-term pressures, beyond the suburban/rural warfare, and beyond the next political campaign to recognize good planning when we see it. These CPAMs will improve the quality of life for South Riding residents and position us well for a successful future.

If you have any questions or comments about anything in this article, please feel free to write to me at lfreeman@southriding.net or to the entire Board at bod@southriding.net.