

ACT Testimony on the Annual Growth Policy  
Sept. 22, 2003

We all know that Montgomery County has a traffic problem. The Action Committee for Transit is convinced that the roots of this problem lie in flawed policies. Even though our transportation and land use policies have been more enlightened than those of other suburban jurisdictions in this country, they have remained wedded to the automobile as the dominant means of transportation. The experience of Washington, Los Angeles, and many other cities should convince us that auto-oriented sprawl development yields ever-worsening traffic jams, no matter how many highways we build. What is needed is a fundamental reorientation toward a multi-modal system of transport and land use in which rail, bus, automobile, pedestrian, and bicycle modes are all encouraged to do what they do best, with transit relied on as the primary means of meeting future increases in demand for travel to and from central business districts.

In this light, ACT has reviewed the AGP Policy recommendations of the Montgomery County Planning Board, and we are supportive of many of those recommendations. We generally agree with the following statement of Chairman Berlage in his August 6th transmittal letter: "Currently the APFO's Policy Area Review formulas declare transportation capacity to be adequate in many geographic areas, and school capacity to be adequate countywide. However, these formulaic results do not square with the daily experience and common observation of most county residents. Traffic congestion has reached unacceptable levels in most areas of the county. The county's major roads, including I-270, I-495, U.S. 29 and many arterials experience traffic that far exceeds the roads' carrying capacity, compromising the quality of life of every county resident and the business climate for every county employer."

Let us face reality. I-270, I-495, and U.S. 29 will not be unclogged in the foreseeable future. The only solution is to provide high-speed rail transit alternatives that enable travelers to bypass the congestion. For this reason, ACT has been a long time backer of the Inner Purple Line, Corridor Cities Transitway, and bus improvements. Only transit can offer a long term alternative to the congestion experienced by our residents. The commitment to transit facilities that the Planning Board recommends is very important, and it must be far more than minor improvements like bus shelters.

The value of fixed guideway transit is not just to offer alternatives to congestion, it is to also encourage people to live in Transit-Oriented Developments. These TODs will usually be in our region's activity centers, whose residents have nearby access to many retail and job opportunities. In transportation terms, the VMT per capita will be less than average for these people. Transit is one of the "carrots" to help people move into a TOD

community. In other words, we need to focus on Metro station areas and other transit-oriented areas not just because of transit but because in these TOD areas most people still drive a lot but the trips are short and don't require major road facilities. Transit is the hook to get them there, not just the end in itself.

For this reason, we also strongly agree with the Planning Board recommendation on page 3 concerning Allocating Preliminary Plan Approvals: "To minimize the impact of new development approvals on already-strained infrastructure, the Planning Board recommends that the preliminary plan approval rate be allocated in a way that permits the most efficient land use pattern to move forward first. To achieve this, the Planning Board recommends allocating approvals to sub-areas of the County based upon expected transit usage; that is, allowing more approvals in areas with higher transit usage and fewer in areas with lower transit usage."

We must understand, however, that not everything that is built next to a Metro station is transit-oriented development. The Planning Board's recommendations will not succeed unless we redesign our urban infrastructure to support transit and pedestrian access. In Metro Station policy areas, main entrances to buildings must open directly onto the sidewalk. Pedestrians must be enabled to cross all four sides of every intersection. Lanes must be narrowed to slow traffic and make it easier to cross streets. Free right turn lanes must be eliminated. On-street parking is needed to separate pedestrians from speeding traffic. We must abandon the idea that streets are built for automobiles and design our streets for people.

We have two more specific concerns with the Planning Board's recommendations. First, we think that the "Red Line policy areas" cover too large an area. We support the concept: some parts of the county are reasonably well-served by transit even though they are not in walking distance of Metro. However, we believe that this designation should be limited to areas with good bus service and, in addition, a style of urban design that encourages transit access. We suggest that the designation be limited to areas with bus service 16 to 18 hours per day, with 15-minute or better headways in peak and mid-day, and buildings that open directly onto sidewalks along bus routes. Office parks and shopping malls where the buildings are separated from the streets by huge parking lots or garages should be excluded from the "Red Line policy areas".

Second, we believe that the current development approval process has built-in biases that make neighborhood-enhancing mixed-use projects more difficult and costly to get approved than blight-inducing sprawl. The Planning Board proposals address this problem, but we would ask the Planning Board and Council to pay continued attention and ensure that these biases are fully eliminated.