

Mobility is Essential to Land Use Planning

Did you ever notice that just after “they” improve a congested stretch of highway things seem to get congested all over again? Why is this? Some folks say, “if you build it they will come.” In other words, it’s inevitable, congestion is just the natural state of urban living. This is hogwash!

There is no magic in predicting the number of trips that will be generated by land use. What we have here is a willingness to turn a blind eye toward mobility for the short-term gains of land development. I know that is a harsh statement; nonetheless it is accurate. We have a continuing problem that is never properly identified and therefore never properly addressed.

Let me introduce a basic concept that is easily represented by a simple formula: Land + Mobility = Land Use. What this simple formula states is: “without the ability to get to and from land, there is no land use.” *This is the primary and essential first tool in planning for growth!* There are many constraints upon land use, however this most basic concept expressed in this formula has been largely ignored since the second half of the 20th Century. Unfortunately, this phenomenon continues unabated in the Annapolis Region.

There are many examples of congestion in the region that could have been avoided if “proper planning for Growth” had been understood: Route 2 from Route 665 south during the PM peak hour and; Forest Drive during both the AM and PM peak hour travel periods come to mind. There are many other examples throughout Anne Arundel County however, both Forest Drive and Route 2 have recently been “improved” and both are and will be recipients of continuing land use development adding trips that can’t be accommodated and congestion that degrades the quality and safety of mobility inhibiting the effective use of the land.

Is this fixable? The answer is yes, but the time and cost required to return to a sense of balance between mobility and land use will be long and expensive. However, the process must change and that change must begin at the local level. We are seeing local citizens increasingly vocalizing about traffic congestion and the dangerous condition of areawide “grid-lock” caused by the most minor of incidents; their gut-instincts are spot-on!

Planning and Zoning Departments in the City of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County treat mobility as just one of many Infrastructure considerations. Infrastructure is important, schools, sewer systems, utilities, and a host of other services are required for modern civil society. However, if you can’t get to and from the land, there is no need for other infrastructure components.

Land use planning in the Annapolis Region is overly reliant upon the automobile. This approach to development is short sighted and assumes that multiple “other” agencies will see to it that mobility is accommodated. The State, the County, and the local government do not coordinate their efforts to insure mobility for existing and proposed development. Unfortunately, there is

no real incentive for this coordination to occur. The result is an endless game of catchup trying to fix roadways that should, and could have been built with anticipated growth. Another result is a *“land use model”* that prevents transit from being a viable mobility component with urban sprawl as the outcome.

The City of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County each have a Department of Planning and Zoning. Neither the City nor the County has a Department of Transportation. This is unfortunate in that most forward thinking cities and counties do have a Department of transportation (DOT). Such a Department optimizes mobility and embraces the functional components of traffic engineering, transit operations, and transportation planning for land use. Without a DOT, the transportation planning function, if one exists, is assigned to an “underling” who reports to the head of Planning and Zoning. Transportation planning becomes little more than an isolated Traffic Impact Study for a development parcel. The City and the County want development but they often ignore the responsibility of insuring mobility that development demands.

Development should bring good things such as tax revenue and enhancements to the urban environment. But, if mobility is not properly considered, the costs of congestion, accidents, and delayed emergency services are the result. These costs far outweigh any development benefits and are difficult if not impossible to remedy after the fact. Politicians want this short-term gain, it helps them get elected and planners who are hired by politicians, know where their pay check comes from.

There is more to this discussion and inter-governmental cooperation will be required but the means to fix the problem starts with the simple formula: Land + Mobility = Land Use.

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