

"GROWING PAINS"

By Justin M. Kiska

For as long as I can remember, one of the most heated debates in Frederick County has always been over growth. It's a divisive issue, there's no doubt about that. As I was making some notes before I started writing this piece, I went back and read some articles and editorials from about fifteen years ago. When I compared them to some of the recent stories and articles, they could be interchangeable. The arguments for and against growth in Frederick County have changed very little over the last two decades. It really is amazing how in twenty years so much has changed, yet so much remains the same in many ways.

The latest discussion about future growth and development in the county started when County Executive Jan Gardner held a press conference to take the final Board of County Commissioners to task for approving so many development projects. At the press conference, she released two studies that outlined the amount of infrastructure improvements that would be needed to accommodate the 21,000-plus housing units now in the development pipeline.

The county executive said it will cost roughly half a billion dollars in infrastructure projects to handle the pending – or “looming,” depending on who you talk to – growth. \$500 million is a pretty big price tag – even scary. But there's one thing everyone needs to realize; this cost is spread out over a period of time. The county doesn't need to find \$500 million by next year. We can be talking as long as thirty years. When you do the math and look at it being just under \$17 million a year, the sticker shock isn't as bad. Of course, some years will be more, some less. The point is, \$500 million in infrastructure improvements over thirty years is not that unthinkable.

Here are two more things to think about. As these 21,000 new homes are bought and people move in over the next thirty years, they will start producing tax revenue to help offset the amount needed for the infrastructure improvements they require. Second, some of the road projects mentioned in the Monrovia/New Market Roadway Needs Study are projects that have been discussed for some time and will be needed regardless of future development. There are already 240,000 people in Frederick County and they have needs as well.

So, it comes down to the fact that the situation is not necessarily as dire as County Executive Gardner's press conference led everyone to believe.

That's not to say uncontrolled growth wouldn't seriously hurt Frederick County. I don't think anyone wants to see the development on top of development that is Montgomery County. At the same time, we can't just freeze all future development and say no more ever again. It cannot be one extreme or the other. We need to find the middle ground when it comes to future growth.

The fact is, Frederick County is growing and it's going to continue to grow. It can't be stopped and shouldn't be. But it does mean that we must be prepared and plan for this development so that everyone will have a chance to benefit. I believe with all my heart, well thought out and planned development is a good thing. In planning for this growth though, the infrastructure must be in place. Our roads must be able to support increased traffic. Our schools must be able to handle more students. And our public services must be able to provide the highest level of service possible.

We can't run from the issue of growth and hope it just goes away. We can't stop all future development projects and we can't just allow development for development's sake. Growth can be good if it is planned and done correctly. When that happens, everyone wins.