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## Five intersections in Towson area earn failing grades in annual county survey

Problems are longstanding, but no solutions in sight

February 16, 2011 | By Steve Schuster [sschuster@patuxent.com](mailto:sschuster@patuxent.com)

Five of the seven county intersections considered failing during rush hour are in the Towson area, but county officials say commuters used to congestion at those intersections shouldn't expect relief anytime soon.

Last month, a memo from county traffic and public works officials offered a 2011 update on the list of F-rated intersections in the county -- and included familiar sites in the Towson area.

The seven are:

- \* York Road and Burke Avenue, Towson.
- \* Falls Road and Seminary Avenue, Towson.
- \* Falls Road and Greenspring Valley Road, Towson.
- \* Falls Road and Joppa Road, Towson.
- \* Loch Raven Boulevard and Joppa Road, Loch Raven.
- \* Harford Road and Putty Hill Avenue, Parkville.
- \* Frederick Road and Bloomsbury Avenue/Ingleside Avenue, Catonsville.

Of the local intersections, the three intersections on Falls Road have been rated at an F grade since 2003.

The intersection at Loch Raven and Joppa Road has been rated an "F" since 1998 and the York/Burke intersection has been at either E or F since 2001.

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Intersections are graded on a scale of A through F based on a percentage of instances when all the vehicles waiting at a red light get through -- or don't -- when the light turns green. Counts are taken during morning and afternoon rush hours.

An F rating means that on at least one side of the intersection, cars waiting in line can't make it through a green light before it turns red again between 86 percent to 100 percent of the time.

The county's Bureau of Traffic Engineering and Transportation Planning reviews traffic congestion patterns at all intersections receiving a grade of C or better every three to four years.

Intersections receiving a grade of D or worse, however, are reviewed annually.

But of the county's seven F intersections, only one is scheduled for improvements that might ease congestion or increase traffic capacity.

The intersection of Harford Road and Putty Hill Avenue is slated for a \$1 million widening that will add a turning lane from Putty Hill Avenue onto Harford Road from both west and eastbound directions, according to Stephen Weber, chief of traffic engineering in the county's Department of Public Works.

That project, which has already received funding approval, is slated to start early 2012.

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Fifth District Councilman David Marks, who represents Towson, Perry Hall and Loch Raven, said he's concerned about the congestion and safety related to the F-rated intersections.

"These intersections tend to be less safe, and I think congestion has a crippling effect on the local economy," said Marks, who before joining the council had more than a decade of experience in transportation agencies, including stints with the Federal Highway Administration, the Maryland Department of Transportation, the office of the U.S. Secretary of Transportation and others.

"I think these (failed intersection projects) are very important, but we just have limited money right now," he said.

Trish Mayhugh, president of the Riderwood Hills Community Association, said failing intersections concern her because of their impact on community life.

"These are intersections that you try to avoid at rush hour," Mayhugh said. "It will back up for blocks and blocks."

"What you have is a wide boulevard, a Towson bypass coming to grips with the old sections of Towson," Mayhugh said.

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"I can't see them being able to do much about it," she said. "Burke and York can't be widened."

**Traffic flows, money doesn't**

Weber said there is a huge "unmet need of state road projects" in the county, but "there is nowhere near the amount of money needed."

Weber said some congestion stems from Beltway traffic spilling onto county roads in the Towson area. For instance, three failing intersections in Towson are on Falls Road at the intersections of Joppa Road, Seminary Avenue and Greenspring Valley Road -- all within a mile stretch just north of the Beltway.

He said Beltway expansion could relieve some of that, but plans have been stalled for decades.

"I remember sitting in state meetings back in the 1980s for the preliminary expansion design plans for the Baltimore Beltway," he said.

Charlie Gischlar, a spokesman for the State Highway Administration, said several bridges over the Beltway have already been replaced -- including York Road, Dulaney Valley Road and others. The \$38 million Charles Street bridge replacement project is nearing completion.

Gischlar said bridges needed to be replaced due to age -- but the state also widened the bridges in the event funds become available for a Beltway expansion.

Marks suggested the county should develop a strategy for addressing the intersections once the fiscal situation improves.

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"We have got to be developing benchmarks now so when the economy improves ... we are pouring that money in schools and roads," he said.

Second District Council member Vicki Almond, who represents Owings Mills and Pikesville, agreed that addressing the failing intersections is "problematic" because of funding issues and the area's continued growth, but she said officials are doing everything they can.

She noted that Public Works officials have adjusted the timing of lights and taken other steps to provide relief.

"They will just have to keep (this) up on the radar screen, so when there is money available, they can address (these problems)," Almond said.

### Development pressures

Another by-product of failing intersections is that new commercial and residential development in those areas is prohibited -- if the development would increase rush-hour traffic.

But county code allows for discretion because there's not a defined perimeter around "a failing intersection" where development would be prohibited.

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"It depends on what degree the trips from a particular intersection adversely affect the failing intersection," Weber said.

Also, there are exceptions to the "no development" rule, including projects in revitalization districts; town centers, such as Towson's downtown business district; and minor subdivisions of three units or less. A developer may also go before the zoning commissioner to request a variance.

Loch Raven community activist Donna Spicer believes exceptions should be more limited. She also thinks congestion is worse than the county is estimating.

In addition to the F intersections, the recent county memo identified 27 intersections across the county with a D rating.

Spicer said a number of those should receive a failing grade, but the county doesn't use the same grading standard that the State Highway Administration uses.

"State Highway will say (an intersection is) failing way before the county would," she said.

Weber acknowledged the state and county use different systems. While the county measures whether or not the last car in line gets through a green light before it changes, the state system, "literally looks at the average delay incurred by all vehicles traversing the intersection," he said in an e-mail.

"In congested situations, the criteria used by the state will generally reflect a worse letter grade than the criteria used by the county," Weber said.

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Spicer said the end result is that the county method makes the situation seem less dire than it really is -- and doesn't draw enough attention to road construction needs or development issues.

"We're supposed to draw attention that we have a deficit here that needs to be addressed," she said.

### 'Loaded' question

*Baltimore County determines the letter grade of an intersection by looking at each approach individually and calculating its "load factor" during morning and afternoon rush hours.*

*During each traffic light cycle, an observer determines which vehicle is the last car in line at the time the light turns green. If that car doesn't get through the intersection before the light turns red, the cycle is recorded as being "loaded."*

*If an approach has a "load factor" of 40 percent, that mean that 40 percent of the time, all of the vehicles stopped in line could not get through on a single green light.*

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*Based on the percentage of times that happens, a letter grade is given:*

*A = 0 percent*

*B = 1 to 10 percent*

*C = 11 to 30 percent*

*D = 31 to 70 percent*

*E = 71 to 85 percent*

*F = 86 to 100 percent*

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