



The Queen Anne's Chronicle

CELEBRATING QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY

INFORMING THE CITIZENS

QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY SCHOOLS – A WINNER!

By **MARY CAMPBELL**

Our schools – their present state and future prospects – are very much a subject of current discussion within the County. We decided to take a closer look at how they stack up, nationally and state-wide.

What we found was truly impressive. Today, as this article reports, we have a really good school system in this County.

In a time of economic downturn, however, it's more than appropriate to be worried about what the state of our schools may be in the coming years. On that subject, see *Concerns Grow Over Schools' Future* on page 2 of this issue.

But today at least, we have much to be proud of and to celebrate, as the "report cards" for QAC schools show. Like any analyses, these report cards are never the whole story, and this is certainly true when measuring the multiple human variables

and outcomes that schools must deal with. Nevertheless, accountability and understanding progress (or the lack of progress) require measuring – so let's look at what the report cards are saying.



The old Queen Anne's County High School, 1901-1966, on Chesterfield Avenue in Centreville, is now the County Board of Education Building. The Board of Education consists of five elected members, two student representatives, and the School Superintendent. The Superintendent serves as Executive Director of the Board and administers the policies set by the Board. This building houses the Central Office Staff that supports the County's eight elementary, four middle, and two high schools, along with the Anchor Points Academy. There are more than 7,500 students in the QAC school system.

– Chronicle photo

Maryland Schools Rank at the Top

As a context for assessing the strength of our County schools, it's important to start with some sense of how Maryland schools fare nationally. The answer: Maryland's public school system does extremely well – it's maybe the very best.

In January 2011, *Education Week* magazine named Maryland the nation's top school system for the 3rd straight year. Similarly, the College Board has named Maryland's schools as the top system in the country for three straight years.

That means if you are a Maryland County school system, you are in some pretty high-powered company. Doing well relative to other Maryland schools and students means you really are doing well.

So let's look at the test results: how are Queen Anne's County students doing relative to other Maryland students?

Grading Grades 3 to 8

The Maryland School Assessment (MSA) is a test of reading, math, and science achievement. MSA scores show how well children in grades three through eight have learned the reading, mathematics, and science skills specified in the State Curriculum.

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PETITIONS FOR REFERENDUM CIRCULATE IN QAC

Petitions have been circulated in the County by citizens seeking to put two recently-passed laws on the November 2012 ballot for decision by the voters.

One such law is a State law (the so-called "Dream Act") qualifying some illegal aliens for in-state tuition at Maryland colleges. The other is a County law (the "big box" law) removing the current 65,000 square foot limit on retail stores in the suburban commercial zone.

The petitions are the first step in the "referendum" procedure, under which the people approve or reject by popular vote a measure passed by a legislative body. (See related article on page 8 in this issue: *A Brief History of Referendum.*)

The Referendum Time-Table

The Maryland requirement for a referendum on a local law like the "big box" law is that ten percent of the registered voters in the County must sign the referendum petition – that's about 3,200 signers here in Queen Anne's. The time-table for getting the necessary number of signatures has two stages:

- First, within 40 days after the enactment of

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QAC SCHOOLS' RANK WITHIN THE STATE OF MARYLAND

Based on percent of schools' students scoring PROFICIENT or above on Maryland School Assessment

GRADE	READING		MATH		SCIENCE	
	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011
3	#1	#2	#2	#4		
4	#1	#1	#1	#4		
5	#4	#1	#1	#1	#3	#2
6	#6	#1	#7	#1		
7	#2	#8	#4	#13		
8	#9	#4	#7	#4	#5	#1

Queen Anne's County Schools, *continued from Page 1*

Here are the latest MSA results for grades 3 -8.

MARYLAND SCHOOL ASSESSMENT, 2010-2011

Percent of students scoring PROFICIENT or above

Grade	MARYLAND			QUEEN ANNE'S CO.		
	Math	Reading	Sci	Math	Reading	Sci
3	86.3	85.1		92.2	92.3	
4	90.3	88.7		95.0	95.0	
5	82.3	90.2	66.8	92.8	95.0	82.5
6	81.0	83.8		93.3	93.3	
7	74.3	84.1		79.5	89.7	
8	66.1	82.7	69.5	81.9	92.2	89.1
Algebra	83.6			91.7		
English		81.7			87.1	
Biology			81.3			92.0

So our youngsters are obviously doing better than youngsters State-wide. How much better? To see how we rank, look at the table ("QAC Schools' Rank Within the State of Maryland") at the bottom of the first page of this issue.

It wasn't always this good. Now look at the County's progress on the MSA since 2003 when the County developed a plan to guide its efforts and meet Federal and State requirements.

QAC MSA SCORES, 2011 VERSUS 2003/4

Grade	Reading		Math	
	2011	2003/4	2011	2003/4
3	92.3	66.7	92.2	72.9
4	95	88.5	95	82.5
5	95	77.2	92.8	63.3
6	93.3	80.6	93.3	61.1
7	89.7	80.6	79.5	62.4
8	92.2	67.8	81.9	42.4
	Science			
5	82.5	79.2	[2008]	
8	89.1	80.1	[2008]	

Grading the High Schools

The report card for high schools is the Maryland High School Assessments (HSA). Up until this year, four tests were given to grades 10, 11, and 12 annually: Algebra/Data Analysis, Biology, English, and Government. As of this year, Government will no longer be part of the HSA.

Among State and County graduation requirements, students must achieve a fixed score in each HSA test or meet a combined score option. The class of 2010-2011 is only the third class to face the HSA requirements.

Here is how Queen Anne's County high school students compare to Maryland students overall.

MARYLAND HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS, 2011

Percent of students taking and meeting requirements

Grade	MARYLAND				
	Algebra	Biology	English	Gov't	
12	87.9	84.6	85.2	89.8	
11	87.0	84.7	84.4	88.9	
10	83.2	81.4	77.9	84.8	
Grade	QUEEN ANNE'S CO.				
	Algebra	Biology	English	Gov't	
12	95	93.1	88.9	92.1	
11	95	92.3	92.5	92.9	
10	92.4	87.7	85.1	87.8	

The SAT, a college readiness test, is another measurement on the report card. (In the old days, SAT meant Scholastic Aptitude Test; now, apparently, the SAT part doesn't stand for anything, and it has become the "SAT Reasoning Test.") Here's how our high schools compared with the State:

AVERAGE SAT SCORES, 2010-2011

	Reading	Math	Writing
Queen Anne's Co.	490	499	478
Maryland	499	502	491
Kent Island HS	498	509	485
Queen Anne's Co. HS	479	487	469

Our graduation rate of 88.94% exceeds State standards, and our 2009-2010 drop-out rate was very low at 1.69%.

Program Emphasis

The good performance of QAC high school students suggests the existence of a good program, which is what one finds. To prepare students for the challenges of a rapidly changing workplace, their program of study is organized around "career clusters" and "pathways."

Career clusters are groupings of occupations based on common services and functions. There are six clusters: — Arts and Communication; — Biology, Environmental and Natural Resources Technology; — Business, Management and Finance Education; — Engineering, Mechanical, Transportation Technology and Construction Technology; — Health and Human Services; and — Science and Technology.

A student, with advice from home and school, selects a cluster to explore and gain experience in, and thus begins to address his/her future, whether it be higher education or going directly to the workplace. Each career cluster has three or four career pathways that provide a sequence of courses and suggested options for preparation for a career.

The cluster courses meet State credit requirements and often provide college level credit or certification in skills required for the workplace.

Bottom Line

These are strong report cards and good programs. For a county to work its way to being one of the top school systems in a State recognized as having the best school system in America is a remarkable achievement.



QAC Wild Turkeys

Photo credit — David Godfrey

CONCERNS GROW OVER SCHOOLS' FUTURE

The Queen Anne's County school system, despite its achievements, faces a number of problems that are cause for concern. Here is a short list. Many of the items on it are related to budget cuts.

- **Shrinking tech budget** — The State targets one technology support person for every 300 computers. The Queen Anne's County school system has no single designated support person for 1000 computers and 923 instructional staff and administration. Technology support is provided on a part time basis by only 2 people who have other job responsibilities.

- **Too many trailers currently in use** — Church Hill Elem.—2; Grasonville Elem.—2; Kennard Elem.—2; Matapeake Elem.—1; Centreville Middle—3; Sudlersville Middle—7; Anchor Points Academy—4; Kent Island HS—2; QACHS—8. Students must travel to and from these "portables classrooms" in all kinds of weather. Not all of them have the toilet facilities hooked up.

- **Recent program degradation** — Examples include: — Dropping AP Chemistry at QACHS, even though there was a full complement of students. — Retiring AP Physics teacher not replaced, requiring QACHS students to travel to Kent Island High School to take that course. — The freshman class (around 330 students), moved from Kent Island High School to the "Annex" on the top floor at Matapeake Middle School (due to overcrowding at KIHS), must be bussed 2 miles across Rt 50 to Kent Island High School for subjects not offered at the Annex. — Radical cuts to Pre-K program, which

many believe has contributed to the strong showing of QAC students in the elementary school years.

- **Teaching positions lost** — 29 teaching positions were eliminated for this school year. 16 para-professionals/aides were laid off and offered 5 hour per day jobs with no benefits, thus reducing both services to students and support for teachers of classes with a very wide range of 22-28 students.

- **Costs assessed for interscholastic sports** — Out of the 26 total credits required for graduation, only a half credit for PE is required. Participation on sports teams now costs parents \$100 per season (not to exceed \$140 per season for families with multiple participating students). Over time, won't this discourage participation in sports, losing its valuable lessons in teamwork, good sportsmanship, clean competition, and regular exercise?

- **Costs assessed for "extras"** — Participation in marching band, jazz band, pit band, madrigal singers, and theatre productions now costs \$35 per student per semester (not to exceed \$140 for multiple participating students from a family). These are talent-expanding and productive activities for youngsters. It will be unfortunate if participation drops.

- **Impacts on teacher morale** — Along with large classes with a wide range of students and less support in the form of aides, many teachers are concerned about the loss of 5 or 6 paid professional days. Teachers, generally a dedicated lot, say they will be doing school-related work anyway, but it hurts to no longer be compensated for it. Teachers' salaries took a 5% hit this year, with a 3% reduction in benefits and an additional 2% contribution to their pensions. (Average teacher salaries are from about \$43,000 to \$82,000, with the average in the \$50,000's due to a young staff.)

MOURNING DOVES

The most popular birds to hunt in the United States are (can you guess?) – mourning doves! In Maryland, the Canada goose and the mourning dove are the two big game birds; in Queen Anne’s County, the doves probably come third after geese and ducks.

Mourning doves are small, fast agile flyers, twisting and diving and rising as they approach a field. Hunters consider themselves to be doing very well if a box of 25 shotgun shells can be made to yield 5 kills.

Each year, 20 to 70 million mourning doves are shot nationwide. In spite of these huge numbers, the population remains stable at a level approaching a half billion birds.

Mourning doves can live for more than ten years; they do well in human landscapes of shrubs, pines, cedars and crops; and annually they produce up to six broods of two “squabs” each. Their prolific breeding, along with frequent adjustments in hunting limits, contributes to sustainable populations that help the species maintain its status as one of the most abundant birds in the United States.

Annually in Maryland there are three dove seasons – this year, Sept. 1–Oct. 8, Nov. 12–Nov. 25, and Dec. 21–Jan. 7. The first season is usually the best, when the doves reliably come to fields planted with sunflowers. After harvest time, the birds leave the sunflowers and move into the cornfields, making the hunt in the second two seasons much more of a hit-or-miss proposition.

Male and female mourning doves are both light grey and brown and generally muted in color. They are generally monogamous, and both parents incubate and care



for the young. Mourning doves eat almost exclusively seeds, but the young are fed crop milk by their parents.

Mourning doves have a small head, with smooth neck feathers leading to a plump body. Beak to long narrow tail, mourning doves measure about 12 inches, with an 18-inch wingspan.

The whistle of the mourning dove’s wings when it takes flight is distinctive. But the sound we most closely associate with the mourning dove is the cooing sound uttered by males to attract a mate – the sound that gives the bird its common name. It is a long, drawn-out call that sounds like a lament, evoking sad memories and making the bird a symbol of sorrow.

Perhaps the lament is for the passenger pigeon, to which the mourning dove is considered to be the most closely related species. The fate of the far more numerous passenger pigeons was very different: the passenger pigeon was hunted to extinction in the late 19th century. Once in the many billions, the last known living passenger pigeon, “Martha” (in honor of Martha Washington), died at age 29 in the Cincinnati zoo in 1914.



Hunting in Queen Anne’s County

Photo Credit – David Godfrey

ADEQUATE PUBLIC FACILITIES UNDER DISCUSSION AGAIN

The County Commissioners have been considering legislation that would modify the County’s “Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance”, or “APFO”. Because APFO has a lot to do with whether development in the County will result in over-crowded schools or worsened traffic congestion, the subject is worthy of citizen interest and concern.

APFO’s debuted in Maryland in Montgomery County in 1973 and spread to other jurisdictions where rapid development was over-burdening schools and roads. Fast-growing Queen Anne’s County came on board with an “interim” APFO in 2001.

Today our County’s APFO is in Chapter 28 of the County Code – which can be found by going to the County website www.qac.org, clicking on the Information tab, then clicking on County Code Library (on two successive screens), and finally scrolling down to Chapter 28, Adequate Public Facilities.

The APFO has ten sections and a lot of definitions. Here’s a short introduction.

What is an APFO?

An adequate public facilities ordinance assesses whether the schools, roads, and other public facilities (such as water and sewer) that will serve a proposed development will remain “adequate” for the community (including the development), after the development is built. The inquiry under the ordinance is:

- Is there enough school capacity to accommodate students from the development, or will any school serving the development become over-crowded?
- Will potable water supply and wastewater treatment be adequate?
- Can the roads handle the increased traffic from the development, or will they become unacceptably congested?

If it is determined (under the standards set by the APFO: see below) that the proposed development will result in an inadequate level of service from a public facility, then the developer has choices to make:

First, he can simply delay his subdivision application and wait until adequate capacity comes into existence, as, for example, if a school expansion or new road is about to come off the drawing board.

Second, he can reduce the size of his project, so that it is below the size thresholds at which APFO comes into play (see below), or he can develop the project in phases so that it will be supported by adequate public facilities that become available at the relevant times.

Third, he can propose a “mitigation plan” under which he “ensures the provision of available capacity” – that is, the developer constructs (or funds) the additional facilities needed to serve his proposed development without degrading the level of service provided to the people who live in the area.

What Developments Does APFO Apply To?

One key APFO issue is what kinds of proposed developments are subject to it. A nonresidential development, which by definition doesn’t create residences for families, isn’t subject to the APFO standards for schools adequacy; nor are age-restricted residential developments where no school-age children are allowed. A nonresidential development is subject to the traffic adequacy and water/sewer standards if it is above a certain fairly small size.

A residential development project is subject to the traffic and water/sewer adequacy standard if it is 20 dwelling units or larger, and to the schools standard if it is 6 units or larger.

Before 2007, all the interim APFO adequacy tests had applied only to residential developments of 20 or more lots or units. In the permanent APFO that has been on the books since then, Commissioner Ransom took the lead in making the school adequacy test applicable to any “major” subdivision as defined in the code – i.e. one of 6 or more lots or units. This action, which had the unanimous support of the other Commissioners, closed a major loophole that was allowing developers to evade their APFO obligations by keeping their individual subdivision applications to 19 units or less.

What is “Adequate”?

A second key APFO issue is what are the standards of “adequacy”. APFO defines adequacy in terms of “level of service”, or “LOS”, and thus it is of prime importance where the LOS is set.

If the LOS standard is set too low, development can result in schools becoming crowded or intersections snarled, because the developments causing the problems won’t have to be delayed or

EDITORIAL: QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY SCHOOLS

The *Chronicle's* look at Queen Anne's County Schools in this issue makes us want to give a loud, appreciative "shout-out" to the teachers and administrators, the parents and students, who are all achieving the good results that we report.

We're quite aware that there are many key programs that we haven't looked into: —Gifted and Talented, —Special Needs, —Anchor Points Academy alternative school, —Character Counts!, —the Service Learning program, —the Drug & Alcohol Abuse Program, —Home-schooling oversight; —the Family Support and Judy Centers, —English as a Second Language, —Partnership for Youth Afterschool Programs.

Another thing we didn't try to do was demonstrate how highly qualified our teachers are — though that is evident from the results they are getting.

At least we were able to mention the high schools' Program Emphasis —today's job market shows the particular wisdom of that. It encourages students to identify their interests, find their strengths, plan ahead, and begin to prepare for the "big world," while still enjoying the pleasures of high school's extracurricular and social activities. QAC students, whether continuing their education or entering the workforce after graduation, have a leg up due to this foresighted program.

Of course, there are problems, mistakes, and weaknesses. We mention some of these in our article on "concerns." Perfection is not an option when you constantly deal with human variables the way schools must — children, teachers, parents, backgrounds, educational trends, budgets, politics.

But for this County to work its way to being one of the top school systems in a State recognized as having the best school system in America is a remarkable achievement. Our teachers, administrators, and school board deserve our thanks — and they need our support as they work to keep our schools up there among the very best.



Photo Credit — David Godfrey

The Queen Anne's Chronicle

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Queen Anne's Conservation Association (QACA), a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation, is the Eastern Shore's oldest conservation organization. Its mission is to promote stewardship of Queen Anne's County's natural resources and to protect its rural character and small towns while encouraging the management of prudent and sustainable growth.

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COMMISSIONERS' MEETINGS

Here are a few items, mostly related to governance and land use, summarized from the approved minutes of the County Commissioners' meetings.

August 9, 2011 The Commissioners:

- Made appointments to the Social Services Board and Emergency Services Advisory Committee.
- Received from Mr. Jonathan Seeman, Finance Director, a financial update and a proposed schedule, beginning in October and continuing through May of next year, for preparing and adopting the FY2013 budget and tax rate.
- Adopted by a 3-2 vote (Dunmyer and Simmons opposed) an ordinance allowing "big box" retail stores (greater than 65,000 square feet) in the Suburban Commercial zone (opening a potential of 13 sites from Queenstown north, according to a staff report of the same date).
- Declined to adopt a citizen-sponsored amendment requiring disclosure, to the Planning Commission and the public, of the identities of persons having an economic interest in proposed development projects submitted to the Planning Commission.
- Recognized young football player Finn Walsh as Queen Anne's County Player of the Year 2010, for his sportsmanship and determination in the face of medical challenges.

August 23, 2011 The Commissioners:

- Designated the Character Counts! Pillar of the Month for September as "Responsibility".
- Held a public hearing on an ordinance raising the 2012 Homestead Credit Percentage (for calculating the Homestead Property Tax Credit) from 100% back to its pre-2011 level of 105%.
- Reviewed materials from an SHA meeting on the Chester River Bridge Crossing including a parallel bridge and a bypass/alternative crossing option.
- By 3-2 votes (Dunmyer and Simmons opposed), (1) directed staff to seek funding for the public sewer "trunk line" recommended by the Public Works Advisory Board (PWAB) to serve communities in Southern Kent Island and (2) dissolved the PWAB.
- Reviewed the 48% reduction in transfer station operational hours implemented in March, finding a 24% reduction in labor costs and a 19% reduction in tonnages.

September 13, 2011 The Commissioners:

- Hired a consultant to review County fees for possible increases and new fees, and to identify additional grant revenue opportunities.
- Approved bids for hunting on four County properties (Crumpton/Dixon, Glanding Transfer Station, Slaby Woods, and Sudlersville Woods).
- Received an update from Mary Margaret Revell Goodwin, member of the Program and Events Advisory Committee of the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission, on 1812-related activities in the County, including events, signage, website, and teacher workshops. (See related article on this page.)
- Granted on a 3-2 vote, Dunmyer and Simmons opposed, sewer allocation for 178 lots in the Chester Haven Beach subdivision currently in litigation.

September 27, 2011 The Commissioners:

- Reviewed the Court House Public/Private Partnership Workshop, discussed funding, and agreed to establish a design committee.
- Responded to the more than 100 students who expressed concern over the exceptionally dangerous 301/304 intersection, urged them to lobby all levels of government for an overpass, and signed a letter to Maryland Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley.
- Designated "Trustworthiness" as the Character Counts! Pillar of the Month for October.
- Received 40 recommendations from the EMS Task Force.
- Commended the Centreville Rotary Club for its sponsorship of Artisans Festival.
- Adopted by a 3-2 vote, Dunmyer and Olds opposed, an ordinance raising the Homestead Credit Percentage for 2012 from 100% to 105%. (See article on Homestead Credit elsewhere in this issue.)
- Commissioner Dumenil introduced an ordinance, No. 11-22, amending the County's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance. (See article on "APFO" elsewhere in this issue.)
- Received a report from Administrator Todd on various subjects, including changes in the proposed "Vineyards" development project on Kent Island near Route 50/Route 8 and staff reductions and replacements.

GOODWIN'S GIFT: 1812 (+ 200)

The War of 1812 is just around the corner, with numerous commemorative events planned over a four-year period under the auspices of the Governor's Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission and its nonprofit fundraising arm, Star-Spangled 200 Inc.

Closest to home is the Eastern Shore 1812 Consortium, a coalition of five county historical societies and tourism offices working with the Bicentennial Commission.

Queen Anne's own local historian, Mary Margaret Revell Goodwin, is playing the leading role in the Consortium as its executive director (as well as serving on two Bicentennial Commission committees). On top of all that, she is responsible for the content and layout of the Consortium's marvelous

website, www.easternshore1812.org.

The site is very much worth visiting, and re-visiting, as the War unfolds on the Eastern Shore over the next few years. When you get there, click on **Queen Anne's County** for a look at the storied sites of Bowlingly, Slippery Hill, and much more.

(Additional historical note: Mary Margaret's contributions to historical understanding include straightening out the *Chronicle* (and the County website) about the so-called "Captains' Houses" at the Centreville Wharf that we mentioned in the last issue. Actually, (watch the apostrophe) they are the "Captain's Houses" — that is, houses built by Captain Ozman — not houses for captains: we are told no evidence exists that these houses were ever occupied by captains.)

THE HOMESTEAD CREDIT: WHAT'S THAT, AND DOES IT MATTER?

The County Commissioners recently raised the Homestead Credit percentage for 2012 from 100% to 105%. To know whether and how that may affect you, you have to know what the Homestead Credit is – which isn't easy.

To begin at the beginning: The amount of a property owner's tax bill is determined by the amount of the **assessment** and the **tax rate** applied to that assessment.

The assessment is set once every three years by the State; the tax rate is set every year by the County. The State does not set any limit on what tax rate the County imposes – that can be whatever the County thinks is necessary.

The Homestead Credit

The State does, however, set limits on assessments – and that's the confusingly-named "Homestead Credit". It has the effect of capping the amount assessments can increase on properties that are the principal residence of their owner.

The State-imposed cap is a maximum 10% increase. The way this is expressed is to say that the "Homestead Credit Percentage" is 110%: for tax purposes, the new assessment can't be more than 110% of the previous one.

(For those few who may want it, there is a box at the end of this article that attempts to explain the mechanics of how the Homestead Credit operates. Everyone else is invited to keep reading and get straight to an account of what the Commissioners have done to the Homestead Credit in our County.)

The Homestead Credit Percentage in QAC

Counties and municipalities can, and many do (as QAC does), reduce the cap below 110% for their portion of the property tax. And the county/municipality portion is much the greater part of the property tax – only about one-seventh of the tax goes to the State. (Look at your property tax bill and you'll see how it divides.)

So here's where it gets interesting. Suppose a county reduces its Homestead Credit Percentage to 100%, as it is free to do – and as QAC in fact did in 2010 under the previous Commissioners. Then what?

Then, as long as you live in your house, the local share of your property taxes (which, as noted above, is by far the largest part) can't go up simply because the market value of your house (and therefore the assessment) increases.

If the Homestead Credit Percentage is set at 100%, your taxes (again, the six-sevenths that are local) can go up if the property **tax rate** is increased, but not just because the value of your house increases. This can obviously be a major benefit to anyone on a fixed income living in a house whose market value has risen: they won't be forced out of their home simply by the tax effects of market forces beyond their control.

Once you die or sell your house, the new owner doesn't get the benefit of your Homestead Credit. He will start out with whatever the assessment is when he purchases, and then he can claim his own Homestead Credit going forward from that point.

The Homestead Credit in Today's Market

Returning to the current situation here in the County, as a result of the action taken by the County Commissioners this past September (see *Commissioners' Meetings* elsewhere in this issue), the protection that homeowners have from the Homestead Credit has been lessened: now the local share of your property taxes can go up 5% a year if assessments increase that much.

Lately we've been seeing many home prices decline, so right now you would think that new assessments, when they are done (as is happening on Kent Island this year), should generally be going down, not up. To the extent that happens, the change in the Homestead Credit won't have immediate adverse tax consequences – it will be a longer term problem.

Near term, therefore, the greater risk would appear to be further increases in the **tax rate**, already up for this year more than 10% from last year. It's not comforting to realize that, as stated above, there is no State limit on what property tax rate the County sets, and that the County depends on the property tax for half its revenues.

More trouble ahead?

CAPPING ASSESSMENTS BY MEANS OF A TAX CREDIT (!)

The Homestead Credit is not only confusingly named, it is also hard to understand because of the way it operates. It doesn't actually cap the assessment itself. Instead, it is a credit against the tax owed, calculated based on the 110% limit for purposes of the State property tax, and 110% or less (as determined by local governments) for purposes of local taxation.

In other words, the homeowner pays no property tax on the assessment increase which is above the limits. (Of course, if the assessment drops, none of this comes into play.)

Here's an example, based on a 110% homestead credit percentage, of how this works:

– Assume that your old assessment was \$100,000 and that your new phased-in assessment for the 1st year is \$120,000. The Homestead Credit says you don't have to pay taxes on an increase that takes your assessment above 110% of what it was.

– An increase limited to 110% of the prior assessment would have resulted in an assessment of \$110,000. The difference between \$110,000 and \$120,000 is \$10,000. The Homestead Credit applies against the tax due on the \$10,000: you don't have to pay that.

– So if the tax rate is \$.874 per \$100 of assessed value (as it is in QAC), the tax credit would be \$87.40 ($\$10,000 \div 100 \times \$.874$), reducing by that amount what you would otherwise would pay.

– Result: you pay ten percent more in taxes due to the increased assessment – but not twenty percent more, thanks to the Homestead Credit.

PLANNING COMMISSION: SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER MEETINGS

During its meetings of September 8 and October 13, 2011, the Planning Commission focused on zoning text and zoning of properties necessary to implement the Grasonville Community Plan, which was adopted as part of the County's Comprehensive Plan.

On **October 13**, the Planning Commission gave a favorable recommendation to the County Commissioners for a new zoning classification, Grasonville Gateway and Medical Center (GGMC). This classification is intended to create a medically-oriented area on and around the Emergency Center property.

Minor amendments to the existing Grasonville Village Center (GVC) zoning text also received a favorable recommendation. These include an increase in the density from 4 to 10 units per acre for multifamily dwellings in this zone. Following a hearing on a proposed rezoning of fourteen specific properties in Grasonville, the Planning Commission recommended new zoning classifications for the properties to

conform to the intent of the Grasonville Community Plan and the Comprehensive Plan.

Both the recommended zoning text changes and the recommended property re-zonings are subject to approval by the County Commissioners.

On **September 8**, the Commission approved a timber harvest request for 31 acres on the Kyfhauser Farm in Ingleside. Thereafter, at the October meeting, the Commission discussed the history and rationale for the Planning Commission's involvement in approval of timber harvests on open space land; a discussion of the approval process will continue.

Following a joint meeting on September 8 with the Economic Development Commission during which reports from two joint subcommittees were given, the Planning and Economic Development Commissions agreed to continue meeting jointly periodically. The next joint meeting was scheduled for March 8.



Drive carefully! October, November and December are migration and mating time for deer. State Farm Insurance reports there are 2.3 million collisions between vehicles and deer annually, resulting in 200 fatalities a year. Average damage to the car or truck from the collision is \$3,103. Deer are most active between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. and often travel in herds. If you see one crossing the road, there can be more coming!

Photo Credit – David Godfrey

HOLLY FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Holly has been associated with the winter holidays as a decoration and a religious symbol for about as long as people can remember. And one kind of holly has a very special connection with the Eastern Shore.



The 275-year-old holly tree on Wye Island first sprouted from a holly berry around 1735-36 – the years in which Paul Revere, Patrick Henry, and John Adams were born.
Photo credit – David Godfrey

Holly History

Holly was a part of the ancient Romans' celebration of their god of agriculture at the winter solstice. Further north pre-Christian Celts were also decorating with holly leaves and branches and Druids were treating it as a sacred tree, because the sun seemed never to desert the holly the way it did other trees.

When Christianity came, a new symbolism emerged around the story of the Crucifixion. The red berry came to represent the blood Jesus shed; the prickly leaves, his crown of thorns; the bitter bark, the sour drink offered the thirsty Christ; the white flower, the purity of Mary. The Christmas carol *The Holly and the Ivy* manages to contain all this

symbolism while rejoicing in Christmas Day and announcing that “of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown.”

Over the years, humans haven't been the only creatures to appreciate the holly. In the spring, its white flowers attract bees and butterflies, and when its berries finally soften, it provides late-winter food for birds, especially cedar waxwings and various songbirds. (It has been reported that when the end of a holly twig holds a supply of berries that only one bird at a time can reach, members of a cedar waxwing flock may line up along the twig and pass berries beak-to-beak down the line so that each bird gets a chance to eat!)

Nellie Stevens

Then there is the story of what can be called the Eastern Shore's own holly.

As the story has been told, in the fall of 1900 Miss Nellie Stevens, a school teacher from Oxford, visited the U.S. Botanical Garden in Washington and gathered a few berries from a holly tree she saw there. Back home, she planted the seeds in her yard and watched them grow.

Many years later, in 1952, her niece, Eunice Highly, who had inherited Miss Nellie's home and garden, attended a Talbot County Garden Club meeting where the topic was hollies. Because she was about to redo the garden, Ms. Highly invited the speaker to come to her garden and identify the hollies. He came – but he was stumped! Experts from the American Holly Society were called in. They, too, were unable to identify the hollies growing in that yard in Oxford.



Nellie Stevens Holly – Chronicle photo

It turned out that the berries Miss Nellie had brought home were the result of a chance cross, courtesy of pollinating bees, of a Chinese holly (*Ilex cornuta*) and an English holly (*Ilex aquafolium*). So a new variety of holly had to be recognized, and today the popular *Ilex* x Nellie R. Stevens can be found at most tree nurseries and garden centers carrying hollies. (The story of the discovery of the Nellie Stevens holly on our Eastern Shore is told in *Legends of the Gardens; Who in the World is Nellie Stevens?* by Linda Copeland and Allan Armitage, Wings Press 2001.)

Why is Nellie Stevens So Popular?

With shiny deep green leaves and bright red pea-sized berries, the adaptable Nellie R. Stevens holly grows in sun or light shade and tolerates drought and poor soil. A fast grower into a pyramidal shape, she reaches 20 – 30 ft. high and 10 – 12 ft. wide, doing well as either single specimen or as a screen. If a smaller size or other shape is desired, Nellie responds well to pruning.

This vigorous holly self-pollinates, but berries are even more abundant if a male holly is nearby. What more would someone on the Eastern Shore want in an evergreen holly tree? Miss Nellie and those bees provided us with a beautiful gift – one we especially appreciate in the bare winter landscape and in our homes at holiday time.

SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT: A PONZI SCHEME

By CHARLES MAROHN

We often forget that the post-WW II American pattern of suburban development is an experiment, one that has never been tried anywhere before.

Across cultures, over thousands of years, people have traditionally built places scaled to the individual. It is only the last two generations that we have scaled places to the automobile.

How is our experiment working? How does the design of our places impact their financial success or failure?

What we have found is that the underlying financing mechanisms of the suburban era operate like a classic Ponzi scheme, with ever-increasing rates of growth necessary to sustain long-term liabilities.

How We Have Grown

Since the end of World War II, our cities and towns have experienced growth using three primary mechanisms:

1. Transfer payments between governments: where the federal or state government makes a direct investment in growth at the local level, such as funding a water or sewer system expansion.
2. Transportation spending: where transportation infrastructure is used to improve access to a site that can then be developed.
3. Public and private-sector debt: where cities, developers, companies, and individuals take on debt as part of the development process, whether during construction or through the assumption of a mortgage.

In each of these mechanisms, the local unit of government benefits from the enhanced revenues associated with new growth. But it also typically assumes the long-term liability for maintaining the new infrastructure. This exchange – a near-term cash advantage for a long-term financial obligation – is one element of a Ponzi scheme.

The other is that the revenue collected does not come near to covering the costs of maintaining the infrastructure.

How Our Indebtedness Has Grown

In America, we have a ticking time bomb of unfunded liability for infrastructure maintenance. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates the cost at \$5 trillion – but that's just for major infrastructure, not the minor streets, curbs, walks, and pipes that serve our homes.

The reason we have this gap is because the public yield from the suburban development pattern – the amount of tax revenue obtained per increment of liability assumed – is ridiculously low. *Over a life cycle, a local government frequently receives just a dime or two of revenue for each dollar of liability.* In the near term, revenue grows, while the corresponding maintenance obligations – which are not counted on the public balance sheet – are a generation away.

“[This is] a fertile time for questioning whether the economic growth model conceived more than 60 years ago may have run its useful course; whether its benefits, which we measure and publish in exquisite detail, may no longer outweigh its costs, to nature and to social well-being, which are not nearly so well-accounted for. Evidence is mounting that it is not working well for the environment or for people's lives.” – Tom Horton, *Chesapeake Bay Journal* (Oct. 2011)

Three Cycles of Suburban Growth

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, we completed one life cycle of the suburban experiment, and at the same time, growth in America slowed. Our suburban cities were now starting to experience cash outflows for infrastructure maintenance. We'd reached the “long term,” and the end of easy money.

In the second life cycle of the suburban experiment, we financed new growth by borrowing staggering sums of money, both in the public and private sectors. By the time we crossed into the third life cycle and flamed out in the foreclosure crisis, our financing mechanisms had, out of necessity, become exotic, even predatory.

Our problem was not, and is not, a lack of growth. Our problem is 60 years of unproductive growth – growth that has buried us in financial liabilities.

The American pattern of development does not create real wealth. It creates the illusion of wealth. Today we are in the process of seeing that illusion destroyed, and with it the prosperity we have come to take for granted.

The author is a licensed professional engineer and certified planner in Minnesota. He is a founder of the nonpartisan, nonprofit organization Strong Towns, whose mission is to “support a model for growth that allows America's towns to become financially strong and resilient.” His article, condensed and reprinted here with permission, can be read in full, along with related analyses, at www.strongtowns.org.

HELLO DARKNESS, MY OLD FRIEND . . .

Leaving on a jet plane, at night out of Reagan National, climbing and turning north to New York or Boston, the departing traveler flies over the bright lights of the Western Shore, crosses above the Bay Bridge – and then looks down into darkness.

That well of blackness is Queen Anne's County, with Tuckahoe State Park, home to the darkest night sky on the Atlantic Coastal Plain between Georgia and Vermont.

The traveler looks down and sees nothing. But because he sees nothing, we who live here can look up and see everything – all the glories of the dark night sky, invisible to those in the never-ending glow of cities and suburbs.

And the night skies are never more beautiful here in Queen Anne's County than when the cold, clear weather of autumn and winter comes round again.

Let's go out in the evening and look up.

BRIGHT STAR AND FULL MOON

What's that very bright "star" in the southeast sky? It's not a star, it's the planet Jupiter, shining so brightly and steadily, not twinkling like a star.

If you were out on November 9, you would have seen Jupiter very near a very nearly full moon. But if you missed that, not to worry: much the same sight will come round again on the night of December 6.

Jupiter, as bright as it is now, is a sight to behold on any clear night, and with good binoculars, mounted on a tripod or held steady, you can even see up to four of Jupiter's own moons, like tiny stars, the ones that Galileo saw.

Speaking of full moons, the next ones coming up are on December 10 and January 9 (something even the city-dwellers can enjoy, once the moon rises above the office blocks). Here in Queen Anne's County, we can see the full moon in all its majesty, starting from the moment when, as the sun is setting in the west, it lifts above the eastern horizon.

The November full moon was known by early Native American tribes as the Beaver Moon, because this was the

time of year to set the beaver traps before the swamps and rivers froze. The upcoming full moon in December was called, naturally enough, the Cold Moon. And the January full moon is the Wolf Moon, for, as naturalist Hal Borland has written, this is the "time of the hungry wolf pack, the howling wind, and a snug house and warm fireside".

SHOOTING STARS

Full moons are indeed spectacular, but they (and any other less-than-full but still bright moons) can get in the way of another spectacular phenomenon of the night sky – the meteor shower. Unfortunately, that will happen on December 13-14 with what is usually the second most prolific meteor shower of the year, the Geminids, with 50-75 meteors an hour on a moonless night. (Top shower is the Perseids in August.)

Most often, it's best to observe meteor showers after midnight, but that's less true with the Geminids, which are more spread throughout the night. So, one strategy for this December would be to start looking for them, in the east, as soon as it gets dark and before the moon rises shortly before 8 pm. This is far from ideal, and may not be successful, but the nearly full moon, once it's up, is going to put a real damper for the rest of the night on this year's Geminid shooting-star show.

CONSTELLATIONS

Leaving these special events (and their problems), we have before us, as always in the late fall and winter, striding up over the eastern horizon, the constellation most widely recognizable after the Big Dipper – Orion the Great Hunter. (We've had up for some time a constellation particularly associated with autumn, the Great Square of Pegasus.)

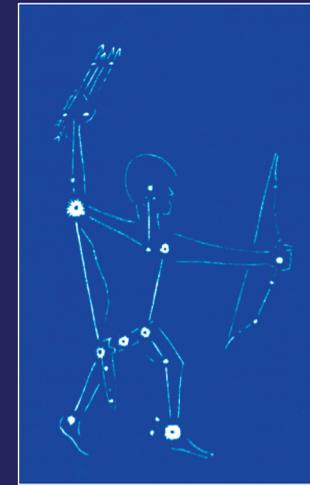
The bright star on Orion's shoulder is the reddish Betelgeuse. Diagonally opposite, at Orion's knee, is the even brighter blue-white Rigel. Between these, three bright stars in a straight line form Orion's Belt.

Hanging down from Orion's belt is his sword. The central "star" of the sword is actually not a star at all,

but the Great Orion Nebula, the glowing womb of many luminous, newborn stars shining on the surrounding gas cloud that gave them birth.

Orion's Belt points eastward and a little south

to one of the Great Hunter's faithful dogs, Sirius, the Dog Star, only 8.8 light years away and the brightest star in the heavens (remember, not counting planets like Jupiter).



—Courtesy John O'Neill

Why is Orion in the sky? According to Greek mythology, Orion was in love with Merope, one of the Seven Sisters (the Pleiades, also up there

now), but Merope would have nothing to do with him. Orion's sad life ended when he stepped on Scorpius, the scorpion. The gods felt sorry for him, so they put him and his dogs in the sky as constellations. And they put the animals he hunted up there near him (like Lepus, the rabbit, and Taurus, the bull). Scorpius, however, was placed on the opposite side of the sky, so Orion would never be hurt by it again.

THE GLORY OF GOD

Enough of stories and astronomical facts, let's go outside!

In Queen Anne's County, "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). We should be grateful that God's glory is there for us – and not the stab of a "flash of a neon light" – when, as we are privileged to do, we open our doors and walk out at night beneath the thronging, piercingly beautiful stars in our uniquely dark skies.

Adequate Public Facilities, continued from Page 3

modified or their effects mitigated by the developer.

Under present law, the LOS for the County's schools is "100% of state-rated capacity for each level of school". Earlier, the interim APFO had set the schools standard at 120%. Upon introducing the permanent APFO adopted in 2007, Commissioners Ransom and Billups stated, and their colleagues all agreed, "We firmly believe a school is full at 100% capacity, not when portables line what once were playgrounds."

The 2007 Commissioners also tightened up the interim APFO's traffic LOS for intersections at peak hours – reducing the County's tolerance for intersections at which not all of the vehicles stopped at the signal get through on the green.

What Next?

As the County considers relaxing APFO back toward its pre-2007 interim form, citizens

may want to bear in mind that the 2010 Comprehensive Plan calls for the existing APFO to be "maintained and improved through yearly review to provide adequate public facilities as part of development proposals" (page 8-22: the Comp Plan is one of the "Quick Links" on the homepage of the County website).

The 2010 Comp Plan, with its endorsement of maintaining and improving APFO, is only a little over a year old, and presumably has another five years of life ahead of it before it is revised.

At this time, the County has not completed Job One under the Plan – which is to revise the zoning and subdivision regulations in Chapter 18 to conform to the new Plan. If you go to Chapter 18 (following the directions above), you will see that it still announces that "[t]he purpose of this Chapter 18:1 is to implement the **2002** Queen Anne's County *Comprehensive Plan*" (emphasis added).

In the view of some citizens, getting the County's land use laws to implement the current, 2010 Plan ought to take priority over making changes in APFO that contradict the Plan.

Petitions for Referendum, *continued from Page 1*

the law, the petition sponsors have to obtain and submit to the local board of elections at least half of the required signatures.

- Second, if the sponsors succeed in doing that, then they are granted another 40 days to gather and submit however many more signatures they need to get up to the full ten percent.

Ordinarily, local laws adopted by the County Commissioners go into effect 45 days after enactment. But while the referendum petition is going through the two stages, the effective date is delayed, and if the petition successfully clears both hurdles, then the law does not go into effect until after the voters decide on it at the next election.

Negotiating the Technicalities

While the basic principles of referendum are straight-forward, it takes the Maryland Constitution nearly 1500 words (three times longer than the Bill of Rights) just to establish those principles – and the laws, regulations, and judicial decisions on how a referendum must be conducted add an uncountable number of additional words to the mix. (To see the tip of this iceberg, visit the State Board of Elections website, <http://www.elections.state.md.us/> and click on Forms and then Petitions and Candidacy.)

The result is that, as the *Baltimore Sun* said in an editorial earlier this year, the referendum process is “so difficult and potentially litigious that it’s only available to those with enough money or organization to overcome the barriers involved.” The difficulties include, but are not limited to, how the petition is framed, what constitutes a valid signature on the petition, and whether the “circulator” of the petition did his/her job correctly.

These pitfalls are why petition sponsors typically try to submit 20% or more signatures than are legally required: they know that many of them are going to be rejected based on technicalities.

Improving the Process

Lately, however, there has been good news for referendum. Two recent developments are helping lift the burden of difficulties that referendum petitions have traditionally carried.

One is a decision last March from Maryland’s highest court that stops the practice of throwing out signatures that are “illegible” even though the signer’s full name is clearly and correctly printed above the signature. For the first time, a commonsense approach is being taken to the requirement that the signer must supply his/her surname as it appears on the voter registration list and at least one full given name and the initial of any other names. The new guidance from the State Board of Elections, following the court’s ruling, is: “Both the printed name and the signature must be reviewed. If every required component is present when considering the printed name, the signature, **or both together**, the signature is to be accepted.” (Emphasis added)

This reform makes it much less likely that any signer who follows the instructions on the petition form and prints his/her full name will have the signature invalidated, even if the penmanship is idiosyncratic.

The second development of importance to referendum in Maryland is the Dream Act petitioners’ creation of a web-based computer program that over 28,000 voters used to generate, print, sign, and mail in petition pages. Going to the sponsors’ website, the voters typed their names, birth dates, zip codes and e-mail addresses into a basic form. The software then tapped into voter-registration data to fill out the petition sheet in the precise format the law requires. The voters then printed out the form, signed it, and mailed it to the petition sponsor.

The State Board of Elections has accepted this new procedure in connection with the Dream Act petition and issued formal guidance approving it for general use. While the procedure is being challenged in court by proponents of the Dream Act, there is reason to believe that it will pass muster with a Court of Appeals willing to construe the referendum rules so as to advance, rather than hobble, the people’s exercise of this fundamental right.

Referendum petitions may be having a re-birth, both in the County and State-wide.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF REFERENDUM

First, some definitions:

- (1) **Referendum** – the people vote approval or disapproval of legislation enacted by their representatives;
- (2) **Initiative** – the people put forward legislation and vote whether to adopt it; and
- (3) **Recall** – the people vote on whether to remove a representative from office before the end of his/her term.

Corruption and Reform

As the 19th Century came to a close, a powerful reform movement rose up against the governmental corruption of the so-called “Gilded Age”. What use are “checks and balances”, the reformers asked, if all the branches of government are controlled by moneyed special interests and political machines?

The reformers had a broad agenda to expand democracy and make the people’s representatives responsive to the people. They wanted women’s right to vote, secret ballots, election of U.S. Senators by the people rather than by State legislatures, primary elections – and referendum, initiative, and recall.

The reformers were successful, over two decades, in achieving much of their agenda.

Referendum and Initiative

In 1897, Nebraska became the first State to allow cities to place initiative and referendum in their charters. In 1898, South Dakota became the first State to adopt statewide initiative and referendum.

In 1912, when initiative and referendum were adopted in Ohio, Theodore Roosevelt, in his famous “Charter of Democracy” speech, memorably declared:

“I believe in the initiative and the referendum, which should be used not to destroy representative government, but to correct it whenever it becomes misrepresentative. . . [T]he initiative and referendum should be used, not as substitutes for representative

government, but as methods of making such government really representative.”

Between 1898 and 1918, 24 States and numerous local jurisdictions adopted initiative and/or referendum, including in 1915 Maryland, which, like New Mexico a few years earlier, adopted referendum only and not initiative. (Since its adoption, referendum on State legislation has occurred 13 times in Maryland.) It remains the case today that about half of the States have initiative or referendum or both.



Bob Fox collects referendum petition signatures

—Chronicle Photo

Recall

Nineteen States (not including Maryland) and the District of Columbia permit recall elections to remove state officials. Still more States, again apparently not including Maryland, allow local recall elections to remove county or municipal officials. (For details, see www.ncsl.org.)

Recall began in the United States in a municipality--Los Angeles--in 1903. Michigan and Oregon, in 1908, were the first States to adopt recall procedures for State officials.

Historically, recall attempts at the State level have been mostly unsuccessful, apart from the rare episode like the recall of Governor Davis of California in 2003. The recall has been used much more often, and with more success, at the local level.



Photo Credit – David Godfrey

CLEAN WATER WEEK –

Celebrate restoring the health of our local rivers and streams!

- Thursday, November 17, 6:00: **Maryland Environmental Legislative Preview** - Learn about and discuss environmental issues likely to be debated at this year’s General Assembly. Free. Historical Society of Talbot County, Easton.
- Friday, November 18, 6:00: **Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival** – A collection of professionally made wild and scenic environmental films (2 hrs). Auction. Food & Drink. \$25. Avalon Theatre, Easton.

For more information, see Chesapeake Bay Foundation at www.cbf.org

