

Targeting Growth and the Impact on County Services

-Written by Council Member David C. Harrington (D) – District 5
Chair, Council Committee on Transportation, Housing and the Environment

Take a look around – big, new developments, increasing land values, and an influx of high-income residents boosting our tax base. Prince George’s County is experiencing tremendous economic growth. How we manage this situation will determine the social fabric and infrastructure of our communities. How we define our “communities” will determine the county’s identity.

Land use policy sits at the core of defining communities and neighborhoods. Carving up land and assigning it to a use category is the nucleus of community identity formation. At some point, all land is subject to planning and zoning. Planning and zoning provides recommendations for certain uses within various residential and commercial zones, including placement of parks and other public facilities. These recommendations, especially when applied to a certain area, make up the Master Plan. The Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission develops these plans after considerable input from residents and the business community.

Many of the existing plans were approved in the early 1990’s when the county was viewed as a rural enclave to Washington, D.C. Housing prices were skyrocketing in D.C. and many middle-class families wanted larger homes at reasonable prices, which they found in new Prince George’s County communities like Lake Arbor, Woodmore, Fox Lake, and Springdale. The marketing strategy for Prince George’s County--the new center of bustling growth at a price you can afford--was born. The county enjoyed new revenue and increased attention, but the need to ensure adequate public facilities and revitalize older, established communities was ignored.

Middle class families moving out of the District of Columbia are escaping high crime and deteriorating public schools. With excitement they see the opening of such facilities as Everett Just Middle School, Kingsford Elementary School and Flowers High School as confirmation of the decision to move, until they witness the overcrowding. Those who routinely analyze population data underestimated the desire of these new citizens to place their children in public schools. Even today, one of the county’s newest high schools, Flowers is roughly 120% over capacity with approximately 14 temporary classrooms.

The emphasis on building new residential subdivisions shifted attention away from the county’s established communities, such as Landover, Glenarden, Fairmount Heights, North Brentwood, and Suitland, at one time centers of social and political activity. Such communities have become havens for criminal activity, decaying strip malls, and abandoned buildings. These trends, while troubling, represent an opportunity for to develop a more inclusive land use policy balancing expansive residential growth and creating needed community assets in our established communities.

The Prince George’s County General Plan establishes three policy areas in the county: the Developed Tier (essentially characterized by older, established communities); Developing Tier (mostly newer communities in emerging areas such as Bowie, Mitchellville, and Glenn Dale); and Rural Tier (situated in the eastern and southern portions of the county). The county’s General Plan encourages one-third development in the Developed Tier; two-thirds development in the Developing Tier; and one-percent development in the Rural Tier.

Revitalization and redevelopment initiatives, which embrace transforming abandoned multi-family units into new ownership projects or changing heavy industrial uses near residential areas into community-friendly assets, often occur in the Developed Tier. Medium to large lot residential projects generally occur in the Developing Tier. Farms and estate homes in the county are commonly located in the Rural Tier, which also includes the Patuxent and Potomac rivers, the Mattawoman Creek watersheds, and acres of open space.

Howard and Montgomery counties, which have preserved rural areas and developed Transferable Development Rights (TDR's), join Prince George's County as regional growth participants realizing the need for growth management tools. TDR's allow developers and landowners to sell development rights in exchange for transferring land density and permanently preserving space. Developing this tool for our rural area would help sustain the General Plan recommendations while moving development in areas with adequate facilities. The County Council has enacted legislation that paused new preliminary plats of subdivision in the Rural Tier so that TDR's conservation subdivision guidelines, and other land preservation tools can be developed.

This strategy maintains the integrity of the General Plan and encourages revitalization in the county's established communities. Such reinvestment begins to address years of neglect, turning the tide from despair to possibility.

Our development strategy must factor in school construction, access to various modes of transportation, public safety response, and commercial and retail opportunities for job creation. It should also include:

- ◆ Designing Transferable Development Rights and Conservation Design Zones
- ◆ Redeveloping and revitalizing established communities
- ◆ Creating jobs by sustaining commercial and retail zones
- ◆ Promoting transit-oriented development - residential and commercial development near or around metro stations
- ◆ Insuring timely construction of public adequate facilities such as schools, public safety, and modes of transportation through public and private support

Developing a TDR program and development strategy takes time, but it will divert us from the current path of creating "have" and "have-not" communities