

County development update reboot

Every ten years, Howard County updates its development process and regulations in what is called the General Plan, currently HoCo By Design. It was delayed after a year of community input with an announcement that implementation was to take place after local 2022 elections. We are now in the middle of our current local election season. Positions on this plan will be hot topics for candidates. It will take time to implement these new rules, so the County's work on the plan has restarted.

County presentations that were made a year ago, halted for over six months, are now back with a new look. Originally, County scenarios laid out extremely high levels of new home building across the County, and mentioned very little about how the Howard County Public School System could accommodate much higher levels of growth. Most of the feedback expressed grave concerns about creating more flexible regulations for developers. Many believe this level of response caused the plan to be held off until after the election year. No matter who is in office, we need to hold our representatives accountable to balance growth needs with adequate public services.

The new presentations are being rolled



out over a series of “planning themes”. The first theme was recently revealed, called “Dynamic Neighborhoods: Maintaining and Supporting Vibrant Living for a More Equitable Future”. The new plan includes adding new types of buildings allowed, across the County, to increase density. This current theme is noted as being a result of community input, yet, its singular focus is one commendable goal of trying to decrease home prices across all income groups. Other goals have been all but ignored. Even so, can we actually accomplish lower home prices by simply easing building regulations and expanding housing types allowed? Repackaging the enormous growth plan, without customizing regional-based needs, such as school capacity, storm water management, and varying neighborhood topography and road space, has created valid concerns.

Those issues are unaddressed for the sake of building the most supply with maximum in-fill and little specific planning.

Much of the Hoco By Design original and current plans focus on the belief that increasing residential development across all income levels is the way to get more diverse and affordable housing for all. Historically, this has not proven true. The recent census showed that Howard County had the second highest growth rate in Maryland, after Frederick County. Expensive County benefits given to developers to provide affordable units has ended up with very little accomplished during that explosive growth period. Work is being done to implement the housing trust funding, but that needs to be safeguarded, so that funding only goes to County projects, where the units promised for lower incomes actually come to fruition.

The County's new plan has some good ideas about how to address goals of providing more diverse and affordable types of housing, but there is not enough information about how to balance that with equally important goals of environmental protection, storm water management, and school crowding. We cannot just have one singular goal in a plan that is going to

control development regulations for the next decade.

The next County Council will determine if the County's goal to increase residential growth will be properly balanced with other needs, or if that goal will supersede education, environmental public facility, and safety issues. Be sure to know where your representatives and candidates stand on these issues.

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