

## **The Business Monthly**

*The business of Howard and Anne Arundel counties and the BWI Business District*

# Howard County proposes to grow. How much is too much?

by **Lisa Markovitz**, February 28, 2023

The County is updating a 10-year growth plan called HoCo By Design. A rewrite of zoning rules, changing how development is regulated, will follow. Community input to the County's draft plans includes concerns regarding how the planned increased population can keep pace with infrastructure (county-provided public services such as schools, roads, health and safety provisions), and balance environmental preservation and stormwater management. The County notes large housing increases will provide more affordable housing. Will this singular goal offset concerns, or even actually be attained?

Current rules require developers to build some moderate-income affordable housing in a project, but these rules also let developers sidestep that requirement by paying a fee. Thus, building is unlikely to increase the supply of these units much. If the fees were increased, it would spread out their locations, beyond just lower-priced market areas.

Increased development will not lower home prices enough to appreciably assist low-income buyers, either. Builders do not have a monopoly on home supply, due to resales of older homes. A large increase in new supply might lower prices across the spectrum a bit, but not enough to suddenly be affordable in

ranges where they were not previously.

The HoCo By Design plan includes very little information about how to pace increased school enrollment tied to development. It relies on the myth that resales account for most new students, as if there is nothing to be done about this problem. The source of this myth is Howard County Public School System data that annually notes the percentage of “new” students enrolled each year from new homes.

According to the HCPSS Office of Planning, they define a new home as one from the last 10 months of brand new occupancy permits. The “new” label is then not retained going to the next year’s data. Instead, each year, a snapshot is taken, of how many of the “new” students are from up to 10-month-old homes. This annual HCPSS report has been used to claim that resales (homes where older families sell to younger ones with children) are causing overcrowded schools. Calling a home a resale after only 11 months is creating this false conclusion. As it is, this woefully low estimate from the HCPSS study, shows about 40% of new students coming from new homes.

The County’s plan does include promising exploration of new school facility sources, including public-private partnership models, and commercial reuses. Meanwhile, annual school capacity information continues to predict continually growing over-capacities even with too low enrollment estimates, and this is before upcoming increased growth goals.

Another misconception in the HoCo By Design plan is that job creation has a linear relationship to housing creation. (See the

draft plan's chapter on Economic Prosperity, page 36 and the HoCo By Design Scenario Planning Guide, Table 6.) The Columbia Gateway area will increase commercial space and create jobs there, but not elsewhere in the County. To have an emphasis of commercial growth throughout the county, we need a better balance between high-density housing developments and commercial zoning.

We also need to be realistic about transportation resource timing. Hoco By Design notes goals of increased walkability that could lead to less usage of cars. We are already seeing recommendations in land use cases to have reduced parking requirements, but that is premature. Currently, there is very little required connectivity, nor walk/bike-ability beyond immediate project areas.

Meeting the needs of the entire community will be a difficult task. The County is tasked with providing planning solutions for how schools, roads, the hospital, and other public services are going to keep up with all this growth.

Hearings on these plans start with the Planning Board, where the public can give input on March 9, sign up by March 8 at <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/boards-commissions/planning-board>. The County Council will also hold hearings before moving the plan forward, after the Planning Board recommendations.