

Opinion | Can we compromise on Howard county growth?



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The Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) review committee held a public hearing recently. APFO measures public service levels, which can temporarily halt residential building. Another hearing will be held next spring, prior to the committee's recommendations to the County Council.

Community testimony varied. School overcrowding concerns were noted, including displeasure with frequent redistricting to address overcapacity, which takes students to more distant schools, versus delaying new home building. The school system cannot get enough funding to solve the need for both increased school seats and needed repairs, due to competing needs for resources.

A long-term deficit in the school budget has put us in this difficult position. Over many decades, Howard County's development fees were ten to twenty times lower than other growing counties. Recently, a large increase in these fees was fully implemented, yet remains about 2/3 to 1/3 of surrounding counties' rates. It is hard to recover from that long-term inadequate funding of schools and other infrastructure.

Other testimony expressed desire to add more areas of measurement to APFO, such as health, fire, and police services, which could cause further halts to new building projects where these services need expansion. Representatives from these three areas spoke to the committee at a meeting prior to the public hearing, noting they did not want to be responsible for slowing growth.

The Howard County Professional Fire Fighters Association disagreed. They noted concerns at the public hearing, stating that statistics showed that 58% of their emergency calls are for those aged 55 plus. Many new age-restricted communities, including a new, large Erickson property are planned. Also, the current location of the new Gateway commercial community is surrounded by some of the busiest fire stations.

Adam Nolder, for the HCPFFA, also noted that ambulance services are often diverted away from Howard County, due to frequent crowding at our one hospital. This adds time to service provision and factors into fire station capacity needs. It was stated that growth, especially for 55 plus is needed, but we must plan appropriately for adequate safety services therein.

Several testified to the need for more affordable housing in the county, especially for middle and low-income levels. Budgetary concern was a common theme as well. Many feel that residential development can bring the needed income and property tax revenues needed to build more infrastructure (expand schools, roads, etc.). Unfortunately, our long-term lower fees have not funded needed updates. When expensive public service expansion needs are at a high level, growth is not necessarily profitable. Thus, we must concentrate on new revenue sources and direct provision of affordable housing. If we look at ways of providing regionally needed middle and low-income housing versus inundating with market-rate projects that provide very little in that regard, it will create a better balance for our school system, public safety provision, and health service needs.

The commercial building industry should also pay close attention to this budgeting problem. It has become so dire that recent state task force reviews have proposed having school surcharge fees apply to commercial development as well. It is an issue that is affecting us all.

A possible point of compromise does exist. APFO is currently uniformly applied to all types of building units and areas. One issue the Committee could discuss is a compromise that higher producing student units, such as houses with 2+ bedrooms, should have longer wait times than studio/1-bedroom units. The wait times could also be treated differently, depending on the extent of overcapacity. For example, if a project is located near a high overcapacity school at APFO measured levels, they could have a longer pause than those located near schools at much lower overcapacity levels.

Be sure to email the APFO review committee at APFO@howardcountymd.gov with your positions, as the committee will be given these comments prior to making recommendations for changes.