



MY TURN
by Lisa Markovitz

Howard's development plan update continues

The County's General Plan update called Hoco By Design has released two more chapters since its first, "Dynamic Neighborhoods," the subject of my last column. See Business Monthly May 2022 "County Development Update Reboot."

In chapters two, "Quality by Design," and three, "Life Outdoors," the County has continued its reboot of yearlong presentations to update land use plans across the County. There is a bit more detail in these new rollouts than last year's presentations. The General Plan is called "general" for a reason. It is supposed to outline overall planning goals, which will be followed by a zoning regulation update that will handle more specific requirements. These current chapters do contain some details and implementation promises but mostly remain at a high level.

Chapter Two has an emphasis on retaining the character of neighborhoods. The only details are about design uses and materials, that could retain visual compatibility. There are a lot of different types of neighborhoods and regions in Howard County. Some areas can handle more traffic, students, or even storm management and parking, than others. Older neighborhoods have a harder time accommodating more traffic and parking, because of narrower roads. Some have flooding topography problems that are worsened by infill development. The County goal of adding increased residential building types does not yet take into account the different needs of regional locations. Hopefully, when zoning rules change, these variations will be addressed.

Another large goal noted is to push regulations to serve a less car-centric community. We cannot put the cart before the horse here. Our public transportation services, sidewalk connectivity, and pedestrian and biking infrastructure have not caught up to these goals. In the category of Activity Centers, Hoco By Design states "By narrowing traffic lanes and adding on-street parking, sidewalks, and planting strips, streets can be made safer and more walkable....". Do we really want to make the roads narrower just yet? Do we want to force more public parallel parking requirements? Current County transit resources are nowhere near a level that would preclude balancing the present needs for vehicle use. New zoning rules will have to address those realities, along with

general goals.

Ever-present across chapter issues is a caveat of "but we must build more to achieve equity and affordable housing." The overarching main goal of increasing residential building remains, and we know development does not necessarily provide affordable housing. Thus, it is good to now see some environmental preservation being addressed. Unfortunately, there is too much emphasis on replanting versus retaining forest cover. In that category, a 2009 County forest cover data analysis is referenced. Clearly, we have had huge changes since 2009. New plantings do not come close to retaining stormwater, and giving other benefits to air quality and climate change issues, for decades, compared to existing mature trees. Again, we will need to advocate for more regulation details and heavier enforcement to protect these fading resources.

Stormwater management is referenced as being improved by development. This is a concerning theory, unless only dealing with already impervious surface being redeveloped. There needs to be clear differentiation in the proposed plans and rules to preserve forest canopies that remain, as development cannot create improved flood control by removing them.

Climate change, protecting sensitive environmental resources, and managing stormwater all need their own priority in planning development. Also worth mentioning is how the school system is going to accommodate the growth. Maybe a future chapter will be addressing that, as it has not yet been a topic in over a year of proposals, so far.

In this election year, as these plans roll out, we need to look to our Council candidates and note their positions regarding these decisions, which are coming soon, and will affect growth for the next 10 years. Stay tuned for series three in this column, as more chapters roll out from the County

Lisa Markovitz, MSF, is president of civic/political organization The People's Voice..