

Ready to disband the Planning Board?

The Howard County Planning Board (PB) is made up of five County Executive appointees. They have overlapping five-year terms and can be reappointed.

The PB oversees land use in two ways. The most frequent oversight is advisory only to the Council or to the Council serving as the Zoning Board. Less often, they serve as the decision-maker in quasi-judicial hearings.

For all their procedures, they begin by reviewing a report from the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ), with which they almost never disagree.

For many years, the PB has been perceived as a rubber-stamping body that doesn't even follow its own procedures.

When the PB makes quasi-judicial decisions, they have the right to add conditions or make mandatory changes as part of their approval, but seldom exercise that authority. It is such a missed opportunity because it's rare that any County Board has the power to require mandatory changes instead of just making suggestions.

The PB almost never goes beyond what the DPZ says. Therefore, it seems unnecessary to take up the time of developers or the community with PB procedures. Calls for disbanding the PB are legitimate and long overdue.

The PB decision about the Lawyers Hill historic district shows the need for accountability.

Tasked with deciding if the proposed Lawyers Hill development preserved "environmental and historical resources," the PB deemed that cutting eight acres with trees in a legally protected State Priority forest did



MY TURN Lisa Markovitz

indeed meet that criteria.

What a preposterous decision! The community, incensed by this decision, sought help from the Maryland Attorney General's office to prevent the high number of tree-removal waivers in this protected area.

In response, the Attorney General pointed out that Howard County is using too lenient a policy, and not complying with Maryland law requiring stricter waiver granting. When confronted with non-compliance, the DPZ was disturbingly undisturbed.

Will the county administration quickly fix this important legal issue?

Other developments could be affected by correcting the waiver policy, including 60 acres above Ellicott City's Main Street.

Holding to a stricter waiver policy has far-reaching effects and is not just about a small or one-off project.

On the surface, it seems like an easy fix. Just get rid of the PB. Maybe not have volunteers making these important decisions, who may not understand their own authority and create dangerous precedents. But how?

Moving their advisory decisions is easy. Other boards serve that purpose and look at land use issues prior to Council or Zoning Board hearings. The really important decision is where to shift the PB decision-making authority.

Maybe we need to give those cases to the Zoning Board. The elected County Council members serve as the Zoning Board in quasi-judicial land use decisions that are not legislative.

Many clamor to separate the Zoning Board from the County Council. It is a valid goal because council members cannot speak to constituents about court-like proceedings and their plates are already so full.

For accountability for land use decisions, we should separate these duties to a separate body. A new zoning board must remain elected.

An elected body is the best fix but if it is deemed too logistically difficult, then another remedy could be to change other county boards, like the Design Advisory Panel and the Historic Preservation Commission, to allow their findings to be decisive and not just advisory. More experienced, subject matter experts sit on these boards now, which could be added to member requirements.

In any event, there are several ways to fix the Planning Board problem and we need to do something, and hopefully, quickly.

Lisa Markovitz is president of the Maryland civic/political group, The People's Voice.

YOUR TURN

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Is your business ready for catastrophe?

By Ryan Miller

Shootings, cyber-attacks, tornados, and hurricanes.

With every headline business owners, employees, investors and board members ask, "What's our plan if that happened here?"

Many companies don't have staff dedicated to identifying and reducing risk at the strategic level, let alone doing the tactical work such as developing a business continuity plan.

The good news is there are lots of great resources available to businesses.

If you are local to Howard County, see what my former team in the Howard County Office of Emergency Management is offering by checking out their Facebook page.

What else could you do today that would inch you one step toward being prepared?

How about assembling a small resource kit so you are never standing on the sidewalk the morning after a disaster wondering how to start your business recovery? This kit might be kept secure offsite as a paper file but should also be made available online through a secure cloud provider.

Not yet leveraging the cloud for business?

Now is the time, as you may increase the security of your files, increase workflow efficiency and make your

most essential records accessible should you ever lose your office to disaster.

Here are three important things to include in your disaster resource kit:

Contact Information: Keep an up-to-date list of key contacts. It should include employees, key stakeholders, customers, suppliers, and service providers. You need to know how to reach your bank, insurance company, landlord, payroll service and utility providers. Brainstorm who else should be on the list with your team and then commit to keeping the list current.

Documents: At least annually, gather copies of insurance policies, lease agreements, key contracts, even floor plans for your building. Include any manuals or records that would make disaster recovery go a little smoother. Again, rely on your team to develop a comprehensive list and keep it current.

A Pre-Identified Rally Point: Displaced business owners often don't know where to go if they can't access their normal worksite. Decide before disaster strikes where you would gather your key decision makers in the event of a crisis. You may even choose to store your key information, documents and backup media at that location.

If you buzzed right through the steps above, maybe it's time to survey your business's Six Critical Functions – and then take action to fill any gaps.

Here are some questions to bring your level of preparedness to the surface.

Have you taken steps to protect your people, systems and facilities? What could happen that might threaten your supply chain of essential materials and services?

Is your IT infrastructure ready to face cyber-attacks? Is it fully supported and do you have everything properly backed up?

If you had to evacuate or relocate your operations, could you ensure the protection of your intellectual property? Would you be able to stay compliant with all laws, codes and standards?

Are you sure you could ship your products and/or deliver your service no matter what comes your way?

In today's world, we should expect disruption and disaster and plan for them. We need to take small steps toward being prepared as families, businesses and organizations.

The good news is that taking a small step is not difficult. Act now to make the morning after disaster strikes a little less overwhelming.

Ryan Miller, former Emergency Management Director for Howard County, is founder and principal of Critical Functions, a local operational risk-and-resilience advisory firm which helps organizations protect their critical business functions from disruption and disaster.