



MY TURN

By Lisa Markovitz

Howard County dilemma: Commercial versus residential space needs

The past year has seen a lot of Howard County presentations, surveys and input into the coming General Plan update (the County's land use planning guide, currently HoCo By Design), which is to be updated every 10 years. After getting an unprecedented amount of community feedback, the plan was suddenly halted, and put off until after the next Council election this November. Soon after the plan is updated, a full County Zoning Regulation update will occur. Thus, many changes will be starting next year. Positions on growth issues are very important to note in this election year.

There is much debate about what to do with the decreasing amount of available space to be developed in the County, and what focus on redevelopment can be made. Calls to ease regulation of development due to dwindling free space need to be tempered with the knowledge that new space is going to be found when many properties are rezoned in the coming new processes. How should the available space be divvied up?

Over time, the County has attempted to attract commercial leasing to the area, as County revenues from business space far exceed that of residential space, especially when including all the expenses of services to new residents. The pandemic indeed shifted more remote work into the business space model; however, many industries still need physical space, with on-site convenient access and parking. The need for office space is still an important priority in land use planning, with the retained demand of having walkable environments nearby.

The HoCo By Design plan presented by the County includes scenarios of mixed uses of residential and commercial space, varying from adding 45,599 to 80,625 residents to the County. The high-density residential options predict the most new jobs. Attaching high residential growth to high job growth seems to defy common

sense, when commercial space clearly creates more jobs than residential units.

Much of the commercial sector increase is allotted to the Gateway Activity Center proposal, with over 1,000 acres, and about 40% existing impervious space, with proximity to I-95. It is likely the last large growth center in the County. Thus, there is much argument about how its uses should be planned. Should it be an additional Columbia Village, with emphasis on new residential units, or should it be focused on becoming a regional commercial center? The build-out of this area is a very long-term project.

Hopefully, those plans will prioritize attracting needed revenue-producing commercial expansion, versus just piling on more and more residential areas. Many who prefer to solely prioritize new housing supply believe that large increases in residential supply will make our housing prices go down, thus providing more affordable housing. This is not a sound theory. It sounds like simple economics, but many things affect housing prices. The demand to live here is so high that increases in supply are not going to decrease prices to the extent that they become affordable to a set of income much lower than before, especially given the increases in interest rates that are coming. In that same argument, should businesses recovering from the pandemic face higher rents for lack of supply instead? We need a balance in this decision.

As the County plans our future for many years, choices on priorities that affect our quality of life in schools, traffic, the environment, and ability to continue to attract profitable commercial space, need to have a heavy focus in this election year for local offices.

It is very important that the land use decision-makers, especially the council members and county executive going forward focus on the many community needs, including those of businesses.