

Where have all the trees gone in HOCO?

In Howard County, for decades, more trees have been cut down than State law allows.

Development waivers, allowing more tree removal than regulations permit, have been granted because county decision makers have been too lenient.

State Forest Conservation law requires a higher standard than just economic need. Yet, for 20 years developers have reasoned that getting one or a few more residential units in a project warranted taking down more mature trees than was legally allowed.

After 20 years of non-compliance with State law, Howard County leads in defoliating our communities!

Hopefully, this outrageous problem was corrected. The Howard County Council recently passed an update of the County's Forest Conservation law bringing the County into State compliance. Now there is incentive to provide reforestation in the same watershed. Regulations require planting more new trees because mature trees are a greater loss, that is not mitigated by a few new saplings.

Amendments by the Council to the proposals improved the final legislation.

For example, grandfathering was removed. Why? A goal of this legislation was to comply with State law so anything else was self-defeating. For so long, variances and regulations have been so lenient that strengthening the requirements couldn't be delayed.

Another commendable Council decision was removing the Planning Board from any decision-making



**MY
TURN**

by Lisa Markovitz

authority in regulating Forest Conservation.

Planning Board members told the Council that they were frustrated when called on to make technical and legal decisions without expertise or training.

For example, the Planning Board recently approved a development in the Lawyer's Hill historic district in Elkridge, clear-cutting acres of mature trees.

Hopefully, the requested waivers to remove the enormous protected trees in Lawyers Hill will not be granted before these new regulations take place. It is high time a more appropriately trained body makes these decisions.

Many testified in favor of these changes, including a newly formed group, Smarter Growth Alliance (SGA) of Howard County.

Under Preservation Maryland, several SGA's have been formed across the state. Preservation MD recently publicized the following, regarding their newest SGA in Howard.

"...proud to have partnered with the Howard County Sierra Club and The People's Voice, LLC, to create the Smarter Growth Alliance for Howard County, which brings together organizations focused on sustainable development, healthy communities

and protection of natural resources for information sharing, strategizing and coordinating advocacy efforts."

Sixteen county and state organizations, now part of the new Howard SGA, supported the changes made to Forest Conservation this month.

Is it the dawn of a new era? More concern over the loss of forests across the nation in response to flooding, air quality and other environmental issues is being raised.

Anne Arundel County just increased forest protections as well. Both Anne Arundel and Howard tripled the penalties for violations of Forest Conservation requirements.

The new provisions will stop environmental law compliance decisions being made solely on a cost basis.

Recently, developer building fees for schools were greatly increased after many years of advocacy. Now we have increased forest protections.

Dare we hope that Howard County is turning over a new leaf?

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

YOUR TURN

Share your views on this month's My Turn. Submissions must be signed, include a phone number and email address. Please keep your comment to 250 words or less and send them to info@bizmonthly.com

CA seeks input during budget season

Columbia Association (CA) is in the process of drafting budgets for the next two fiscal years: FY 2021 (May 2020-April 2021) and a conditional budget for FY 2022 (May 2021-April 2022).

CA's board of directors holds several public work sessions and meetings, providing opportunities for the public, village community association representatives, advisory committee members and other stakeholder groups to request funding for projects and initiatives.

CA's budget for the current fiscal year anticipates more than \$85 million in funding.

Close to half of the budget comes from annual charge payments: 32 percent from residential property owners and about 17 percent from commercial property owners.

Another significant revenue source is from CA's Department of Sport and Fitness, which produces more than 34 percent of CA's funding.

The remainder comes from the Department of Community Service's programs and services as well as interest and borrowings.

That funding is then used to fulfill the purpose of Columbia Association as a community-wide organization, which begins with our mission – to engage our diverse community, cultivate a unique sense of place and enhance quality of life.

For example, Howard County has earned a national reputation for being a place that emphasizes a fit and overall healthy lifestyle. In our current fiscal year's budget, roughly one-third of CA's spending is allocated



**FROM CA
PRESIDENT**

by Milton Matthews

to sport and fitness programs and facilities.

CA operates 23 outdoor pools, three fitness clubs, Haven on the Lake, an indoor aquatics center, more than three dozen indoor and outdoor tennis courts, two golf clubs, an ice rink, a skating rink, batting cages, mini-golf and a skate park.

Approximately 10 percent of CA's budget supports community services programs, which provide affordable before and after school care at 20 public schools, summer camps, an art center, a free movie and concert series nearly every night during the summer, a youth and teen center that provides a safe and productive space for socializing and mentorship and funding for organizations with a focus on delivering an expanding list of opportunities for growth and service in the community – like the Volunteer Center Serving Howard County and the Columbia Community Exchange time bank.

CA is also a major revenue source for the 10 village community associations. The dollars provided by CA support the operations of the village community associations, which serve to further build community with events and programs and by ensuring that each village's architectural covenants are upheld.

Perhaps one of the most valued amenities in this area is our natural beauty, including our numerous pathways, lakes, ponds and other open spaces. CA is a dedicated steward of our environment, committing annually more than 16 percent of the funds in the operating budget to open space operations and initiatives. CA continues to be invested in greater Columbia's future, as reflected by the budget for capital expenditures. In the current fiscal year, approximately 25 percent of that budget was allocated for construction projects and other improvements to buildings, land and other infrastructure as well as costs for equipment and vehicles.

Columbia is a community that benefited tremendously from many investments from its original developer. Typically, in most communities, their services, amenities and facilities are added as their populations grow. To a great extent, Columbia was "pre-serviced." Columbia's planners wanted amenities to be available for those moving to this new community. Fast-forward four or five decades – CA is now making decisions, including financial reinvestment, about many buildings, amenities and other physical assets that need updating.

CA continues to plan for and work with other organizations to address the needs of this community. We will continue to be strategic in our decision-making and prudent in fulfilling our fiscal responsibilities.

Milton Matthews is president and CEO of the Columbia Association. His email is milton.matthews@columbiaassociation.org.