

First of four forums held last night

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer, THE CAPITAL, Published January 27, 2009

More than 75 people crowded around display tables at Annapolis High School last night, poring over maps and tossing questions or suggestions at county employees who crafted Anne Arundel County's once-a-decade plan for growth.

Can we better control where new houses are built?
How about mandatory recycling?
What's the plan to preserve land?

These were among dozens of queries during the forum, the first of four to answer questions and solicit resident input about how the county should grow.

The process to create Anne Arundel's General Development Plan, or GDP, has been abbreviated compared to previous years in order to complete the document before tens of thousands of new jobs arrive at Fort George G. Meade.

Some residents and anti-growth groups have complained the rushed schedule leaves little time for residents to digest a complex document that was released less than a week ago.

"I'm pleased with the turnout, but they didn't have very long to read it," said Harold Kumar, chairman of a citizen committee the county established last year in the wake of complaints that the compressed process shut out resident input.

"Our sense is that the timing of the forums, the release of the document, and the period for public input was slim - especially given the size and complexity of the documents," said committee member Dinny White.

The 240-page document details everything from how the county should plan for bike paths or mitigate the harm new buildings have on the environment to what types of development should arrive, when and where.

The document, written by county employees over the past year, guides all of the county's planning decisions. Last night was the residents' first opportunity to quiz county planners and comment on the plan. The next forum will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. tomorrow at Old Mill High School. Two more sessions are scheduled for next week, one at Southern High School on Feb. 3 and another at Meade High School on Feb. 5.

Scores of county experts were on hand last night to explain the plan, answer questions, and collect comments to incorporate into the next draft.

"The idea is to appeal to everybody's nature," said Carole Sanner, assistant planning and zoning officer. "There's something for those who like to ask questions one-on-one, something for people who like to engage in conversation, and something for people who just like to listen."

Residents could watch a PowerPoint presentation in the auditorium, pepper county employees with specific questions on any topic, or join one of four discussion groups that parsed details about public-safety plans, preserving the character of existing neighborhoods, managing growth and the county's role in environmental stewardship.

"We're not trying to push our plan down their throats," Ms. Sanner said. "It's the other way around, really."

A copy of the plan can be downloaded off the county's Web site, www.aacounty.org.