

County growth plan needs input

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A draft of the county's once-a-decade plan for growth was released yesterday, and activists and government officials alike urged citizens to weigh in with their thoughts at upcoming public forums.

"They need to download it because the General Development Plan is the blueprint of what we're going to do for the next 10 or 20 years," said Al Johnston, a member of the citizen panel that helped craft the plan. "It's supposed to have all of the capital projects we intend to do, plus the timeline for 142 individual projects."

The document, required by the state and more than 200 pages long, spells out answers to myriad development questions - from how the county should deal with pollution from new buildings, to whether it should focus on mass transit.

It also will address how many more new homes the county should allow and how many parks it should build. It offers details on both specific upcoming building projects, as well as the policies that will guide future planning and growth in the county.

Some of the main tenets of the plan have been batted around in public forums since County Executive John R. Leopold took office two years ago: Keep south county rural, encourage redevelopment of older communities and promote new development that is "mixed use, transit-oriented," combining residential, commercial and employment all in one place that can handle the added traffic.

"Those who care deeply about the growth of this county, and I know that covers just about everyone, should take the time to read it," Mr. Leopold said of the plan this morning.

The draft posted online at www.aacounty.org includes a description on how land should be used, a topic that most often draws crowds of citizens concerned about their neighborhoods.

Mr. Johnston, who has worked on three of the past four development plans, advised citizens with limited time to skim the land-use section that explains whether property in your neighborhood is slated to be open space or a commercial strip. For people in older

communities, he suggested reading the chapter on preserving existing communities.

"We pretty much figured out what Severna Park was going to look like ages ago, but now we need to figure out how to keep it that way," Mr. Johnston said. "If you pay enough to attorneys, there's pretty much anything you can do."

This year's plan has come under fire for excluding public input from the process when compared with the extensive citizen work done in previous plans.

Although the county administration responded to early complaints by establishing a citizen-advisory panel, some members of that panel were doubtful their suggestions were being included. Public forums scheduled over the next three weeks are designed to explain the plan and solicit input to shape it.

"I hope that the public, recognizing that this is the central document that guides how we grow as a county, I hope the public will take part and leave their imprint on the document," Mr. Leopold said.

He added that the quickened pace of this year's plan is designed to get it finished before the bulk of growth associated with the tens of thousands of jobs coming to Fort George G. Meade arrives.

Already, some members of the citizen-advisory panel have been prepping residents from the Broadneck Peninsula to west county on how the plan may affect their neighborhoods. The public forums provide an opportunity for residents to speak up.

"Let's put it this way, it's an opportunity for you to tell the county what you think of the process and of the product," Mr. Johnston said.

All the forums will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. and are scheduled for the following days and locations:

Monday at Annapolis High.
Jan. 28 at Old Mill High.
Feb. 3 at Southern High.
Feb. 5 at Meade High.

Additionally, public comments can be submitted until Feb. 16 in writing to GDP Comments, Department of Planning and Zoning, 2664 Riva Road, Annapolis, 21401; or by e-mail to GDP2008@aacounty.org.

The comments will be incorporated into the final draft, which will be considered by the County Council later this year.