

# Anne Arundel County — Best Place or just another place?



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The paradox of growth is the better we try to make our community, the more people will want to move here, until it's no better than any other community.

Anne Arundel County has grown and changed dramatically in prior decades. It has long been viewed as a desirable place to live, and now we are dramatically encountering the growth paradox.

We are experiencing traffic congestion, environmental damage, noise, school crowding and many other issues that have their root cause in growth. But discussion of this root cause is limited. Growth seems to be the elephant in the room.

Some types of growth are sustainable and can continue indefinitely – for example, growth in quality, knowledge or social well-being. But we know growth that consumes resources like land, water and energy cannot be sustainable in the long term.

Eventually, everything is consumed. Development, population growth, housing growth and related jobs are all based on the consumption of resources and will be self-limiting in our county. Besides being unsustainable in the long term, the short-term benefit of residential population growth also must be questioned.

Planning for growth means planning for the accommodation of new residents in the future. However, most current county residents seem to question the benefit of having more neighbors.

The result of many recent listening sessions, surveys and town halls suggests residents are becoming aware that growth is indeed the elephant in the room. There appears to be broad resident support of careful growth management.

The Anne Arundel Community College survey of residents last fall found transportation and development as “the most important problem(s) faced by residents at the current time.” One need look no further than the last local election results to gauge residents’ priorities.

It is important to distinguish between targeted development and indiscriminate residential population growth. Thoughtful redevelopment of defunct shopping centers, provision of housing options for county seniors seeking downsizing, and construction of workforce housing at transportation centers are examples of targeted development that voters are more likely to find desirable.

Carefully targeted development can be used to adjust the built environment to meet the needs of current residents without significantly increasing the overall population of the county.

Without careful targeting, unrestricted residential development can have a very negative impact upon current residents. Our quality of life depends on things like the natural environment, neighborhood character, open space and ease of transportation.

Without legislative and policy limits, development will probably stop before full resource depletion because, at some point, quality of life will have deteriorated to the point that there is little reason for anyone to move here. Enduring this deterioration, though, would be a traumatic experience for any current resident of the county.

As a step toward avoiding this future, residents and their representatives should use Plan2040, the new general development plan, and the subsequent regional plans to create policies that can serve as a basis for legislation that will manage growth. Other cities and counties have developed tools to manage growth such as:

Restricting the number and type of building permits issued each year.

Discouraging up-zoning of residential properties and encouraging down-zoning.

Imposing urban/rural growth boundaries.

Curtailing development in environmentally sensitive areas.

We should not allow future population estimates used in planning for the county to be based on the simplistic extrapolation of past growth trends. That approach implies current residents are powerless to manage growth and their desires are irrelevant.

The time may have arrived for the people who live here now to start controlling growth and preventing it from transforming Anne Arundel County from being The Best Place to being Just Another Place.

Paul Christensen is a member of the Board of Directors of Growth Action Network.