

Plan2040's weak growth control a threat to quality of life

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The first draft of the new General Development Plan, Plan2040, has been released for public comment. It is very well presented, and production values are admirable. Unfortunately, it is missing some key content items.

First among these is a lack of limits on rates of growth within the county. Over the past couple of years, listening sessions, surveys and town halls have generated reams of data about the wishes and visions of county residents. The need for careful growth management and limits on growth rates was one of the top items of concern.

The last local election highlighted excessive development as a campaign issue and the results of that election also demonstrate residents' priorities. Apparently, those drafting the Plan2040 didn't get the message.

The draft is devoid of any mention of growth rates, other than to state that the county is projected to grow by about 50,000 citizens or 29,000 households by 2040. This is a rate about equal to that experienced over the past several years and is clearly unacceptable to residents in most areas.

Furthermore, in its most recent report to the Planning Advisory Board, the Office of Planning and Zoning stated that, with current zoning, the county has capacity for only 13,488 additional housing units. The Anne Arundel County hotel is almost full, but it seems that no one wants to put out the "No Vacancy" sign.

The plan targets much of the anticipated future growth to the Town Center, Critical Economic and Transit-Oriented policy areas in the western and northern parts of the county and in the Annapolis vicinity. This type of growth is frequently characterized as "smart growth."

However, it is difficult to understand what is smart about pushing development into areas where it is unwanted. The projected growth is about three times the total population of Parole. It would have a huge impact on the target areas. But, what about the people who live in these areas now? Should their wishes be sacrificed in the onslaught of future residents?

Local control over both rates and types of growth will be essential to preserving and improving local quality of life. For example, the need for redevelopment, workforce housing, or housing options for seniors vary widely with location. The Regional Planning process, scheduled to begin after council approval of Plan2040, could have been a wonderful opportunity for the different regions of the county to be able to tailor development rates to meet local needs and desires. Several jurisdictions in other states

have used rate limits on approval of building permits to tune growth to local needs. They simply limit the number and types of building permits issued each year in areas of interest. This approach is a proven technique. Unfortunately, nothing in Plan2040 suggests that anything so radical might even be considered.

What then, will the Regional Plans do? It is stated that they will specify any zoning changes for their region. Zoning, however, must be consistent with the Land Use Plan included in Plan2040, so there won't be much opportunity for local control.

It is also stated that Region Plans will "build on the Small Area Plans prepared between 1998 to 2004." These earlier plans were broadly ignored.

Our quality of life depends on things like the natural environment, neighborhood character, open space and ease of transportation. All of these are degraded by excessive development.

County residents should contact the administration, the Planning Advisory Board, and their County Council members to emphasize that growth rate caps and true local control must be included in our plan for the future.

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