

## **Rethinking Montgomery County Growth Management: Moving from Capacity to Sustainability**

We are at a second defining moment in setting our course for the future of Montgomery County.

The first occurred in the 1960s, when the county confirmed its commitment to the Wedges and Corridors Plan. A national emblem of effective planning, it served the county well. We were growing smart before Smart Growth had a name.

But lately we have coasted on the inertia of past policies, while the county has undergone fundamental changes.

Suburban development reached – and passed – its heyday. Clarksburg is the last corridor city. The ICC and Montrose parkway are likely to be the last major road projects. More and more commuters use transit.

The I-270/MD 355 Corridor has become the economic engine of Maryland, helping position Montgomery County for leadership in America's knowledge-based economy. Global warming, the peaking of oil production, economic restructuring, demographic change, and revolutions in information technology and bioscience are changing where and how we live and work.

In the face of those changes, we remain behind the curve. It is not enough to do better what we have always done. We must move from policies that constrain development based on the capacity of public facilities to one focused on where and how *sustainable* growth should occur.

Sustainable development is not something we do. It is what will happen when we get the fundamentals right, including:

***Energy efficiency.*** We must reduce our carbon footprint and lower greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels. For that to happen, we must require new development that's dense, green, and contains a vibrant mix of housing and jobs. It must encourage walking, biking, and using public transportation. Such development can bring more of the county's homes within affordable ranges by reducing the combined costs of housing, transportation, and utilities.

***Environmentally effective growth.*** We can make Montgomery even greener by increasing tree cover in both new and established communities, enhancing protection of forests and the Agricultural Reserve. Replacing urban parking lots with green buildings and adopting better storm water management practices can improve stream quality. Increasing transit use, walking and biking will help reduce air pollution. They will also reduce the demand for parking, with its heat islands and heavy storm water runoff.

***Connectivity.*** We must connect our urban centers by rapid bus and rail transit systems and accelerate construction of the Corridor Cities Transitway and the Purple Line. We can convert

the major arterial roadways that now divide our centers into tree-lined boulevards that unify them. And let's connect our built environment to the natural environment by the hiking and biking trails in our stream valley parks. Achieving connectivity in great places also means increasing the productivity of an integrated transportation system.

**Diversity.** Great centers are places where people of all incomes, ages, and household sizes can live, work, and meet their changing needs. We can create them in Montgomery County by planning for centers that perform distinct economic and social functions. Each should offer a range of housing opportunities, mobility options, economic activity, entertainment, recreation, and culture. Spaces for local merchants, places for spontaneous activity, and opportunities for organic growth and change are essential.

**Livability.** Developing livable places demands detailed attention to how we design both the public realm and the private and public structures that frame, define, and confront it. Active, well-designed and landscaped streets, sidewalks, and public gathering places foster commerce and civic life. Public buildings must set high standards for outstanding design, energy efficiency, and environmental protection. Sustainable development also respects community history and character while encouraging compatible change.

We can enhance the livability of established neighborhoods by increasing opportunities for housing for all life stages. We also want to require more options for moving people while we improve the aesthetic and natural environment. We can reinforce neighborhood stability by improving access to parks, calming traffic, remodeling schools, and beefing up programs in safety, recreation, and environmental health.

**Flexibility.** A sustainable growth policy will encourage experimentation and timely adjustments to markets and public needs. Our zoning regulations are outdated, complex, and rigid. They keep pigs out of parlors but provide little room for creative design.

Achieving sustainable growth will involve transforming a culture of planning and development defined largely by what cannot be done to one defined by performance: Does a plan, project or building improve the county's economy, environmental quality and social equity?

There will be some short-term disruptions and inconvenience. We will make mistakes. But the choices we make now are as critical to the next generation as those made some 40 years ago were to this one.

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