

# Smart Growth in Montgomery: Fitting More Groceries in the Same Bag

By Roger K. Lewis

Saturday, November 12, 2005; F05

How can 15 pounds of groceries be packed into a 10-pound grocery bag? Get rid of some of the groceries? Get a bigger bag? Do a better job of packing?

A favorite rhetorical query often voiced by planners and architects, this metaphoric dilemma aptly summarizes smart-growth challenges facing Montgomery County. The groceries are the projected increase of population and employment in the county. The bag is the capacity of the county's existing real estate resources to absorb future growth.

Montgomery County, which is Maryland's most populous political jurisdiction and most potent economic engine, will add 170,000 jobs and need almost 100,000 new housing units by 2030, according to forecasts reported by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Demographic trends also point to an increasingly aging population, with less than a quarter of new and existing households expected to include schoolchildren. Consequently, county planners anticipate that as much as 60 percent of future housing growth in Montgomery County will be condominium and rental dwellings rather than single-family homes on individual subdivision lots.

Likewise, the county foresees millions of square feet of additional non-residential development -- places of employment, shopping, schools, recreational and cultural facilities -- being built in the next 25 years.

Meanwhile, the county's boundaries are fixed. But county leaders have essentially made the "bag" smaller by imposing additional capacity constraints. Most important of these is the 1980 creation of the unique Agricultural Reserve.

Encompassing 93,000 acres in the county's northern and western sectors, the Agricultural Reserve includes a third of the county's land area. With density in the sacrosanct reserve limited to one dwelling per 25 acres, new residential and commercial development has stayed within "down-county" and I-270 corridor areas -- Bethesda, Rockville, Gaithersburg, Silver Spring, Wheaton.

Thus, the amount of groceries is growing and the size of the bag is immutable. The only thing left is to do a better job of packing -- and that is precisely what county planners intend to do.

Last Monday, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission sponsored a conference to talk about the challenge. To catalyze discussion, the commission distributed a planning framework subtitled "Revitalizing Centers . . . Reshaping Boulevards . . . Creating Great Public Spaces." The subtitle implicitly identifies existing physical problems plaguing the county, offers possible solutions to those problems and suggests strategies for managing future growth.

Topping the all-too-familiar list of county problems are severe traffic congestion and inadequate road capacity. Added to this are lack of road network connectivity and pedestrian-hostile arterials such as Rockville Pike, Georgia Avenue and University Boulevard. Other problems identified include a shortage of affordable housing and the existence of underused, unattractive strip shopping centers scattered throughout the county.

Despite some innovative zoning initiatives, pervasive single-use residential and commercial zoning has produced many isolated enclaves and neighborhoods. Zoning-induced physical segregation not only deters social interaction but also engenders car dependency and guarantees clogged arterials.

The commission's report observes that existing master plans and zoning laws would legally permit much of the projected growth if all county land were built out

to maximum allowable density. But the patterns of uses and densities adopted in the 20th century won't lead to the kinds of communities envisioned for the 21st.

So the commission proposes "a new planning paradigm."

Its provisions include:

Instead of large-area master planning, small-area, neighborhood-based, fine-grain planning would "direct growth inward and upward." There's no choice: Future growth must entail redevelopment of existing properties, and at higher densities. Commercial centers and surface parking lots, covering thousands of county acres, would be especially targeted for revitalization.

Infill development and redevelopment not only must yield higher densities, but also must include residential, commercial and non-commercial uses to ensure round-the-clock activity. Equally critical is designing animated public spaces, whether plazas or streets. Given pedestrian-oriented activities and ease of pedestrian movement, many people would choose to live near where they work and shop. And if each resident and worker reduced daily automobile trips by only two a day, the aggregate drop in traffic would make a significant dent in highway congestion.

Transit-oriented development, at Metro stations or along light-rail or bus lines, likewise demands dense, diverse land use. Yet transit still complements an interconnected road network. Because people will continue owning and driving cars, building ample, transit-related parking structures is essential.

Segments of the county's automobile-dominated arterials should be transformed into tree-lined "boulevards," shared public spaces that are attractive, that accommodate both cars and buses, and that are safe and inviting for bicyclists and pedestrians. Imagine Rockville Pike as a boulevard with tree-shaded sidewalks abutting buildings and storefronts instead of parking lots.

With its ordinances on adequate public facilities and moderately priced housing and with its Agricultural Reserve, Montgomery County has long been viewed by other jurisdictions, regionally and nationally, as a model of enlightened, progressive planning. And pursuing the new "planning paradigm" clearly shows that it intends to maintain its reputation.

Yet little will change unless the county's political leaders, property owners, businesses and voters buy into the new paradigm. This is not an easy sell. Rewriting development rules to radically reshape familiar physical environments requires new thinking and new attitudes, achievable only through sustained public education. Because many jurisdictions face the same dilemma confronting Montgomery County, and because -- despite recent public criticisms of the planning system's management -- it is the model, let's hope the county is successful in helping its residents pack those future groceries into an attractive grocery bag.

*Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor of architecture at the University of Maryland.*

This article has been reproduced with permission from the author.

# Public Must Be Involved in Planning Development, Growth

Thursday, May 4, 2006; GZ04

*In a far-reaching review of how Montgomery guides growth, county planners have developed a draft document that promotes higher-density development around mass transit. Some of this urban-style redevelopment would occur in areas with Metro stops, such as Glenmont, Wheaton and White Flint.*

*The "visioning effort," the initial stage of a process that could last several years, includes community roundtables involving neighborhood and business leaders. Pamela Lindstrom, of Gaithersburg, a civic activist and member of the local Sierra Club, is involved in the process. She writes about how she thinks the public should be involved.*

Montgomery County is fast using up the land planned for suburban-style development. The only way growth can continue is redevelopment and infill. Planners by instinct look ahead; they realized that their trade in the 21st century would be far different than in the past. Construction projects will be surrounded by existing businesses and residences. Folks in the vicinity could try to stop such development. Yet there are good public interest reasons that well-ordered growth should continue.

So Montgomery County is trying to plan its future like Arlington did in the 1970s, by developing a growth plan that is principled, that is, intended to fulfill the public interest, and that gains agreement from the public (not necessarily the same thing).

The project is called, with inevitable ostentation, "Montgomery in the 21st Century." It will comprise three community roundtable discussions and several public opinion surveys leading to recommendations on new approaches to planning. The goal is sweeping: Counties have more power over growth than is generally realized. By use of its land use and zoning authority, the county can allow commercial growth to continue, or slow it down, or change the type and pattern of growth. These are the choices to be presented to the public.

The Planning Board is recommending that growth focus on transforming some older shopping areas into mixed-use centers and arterial roads into boulevards, undertaking the sort of urban transition that occurred in Arlington. This transformation would have many benefits. Many more people would have the opportunity to live in situations in which they could be independent of cars and the unstable energy market. They could live, in short, sustainably, in a century when sustainability will become a preoccupation for the masses, not just the green fringe (like me).

The urbanized centers would benefit not just their inhabitants, but also the people who live in the traditional suburban neighborhoods around them. We would be able to access many of our needs by foot or bicycle. More of us would have access to good public transport. Children could walk to school again!

This is the enthusiasts' vision. But for some residents, the urbanizing of centers and boulevards just means another opportunity for profit by politically active developers and zoning attorneys. To win public trust, officials need to give the planning process back to the public, learning the lesson of Arlington. Officials developed plans for the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor with intense public input. At public meetings the residents voted on how much development to allow around each transit station. Far from precluding development, the residents legitimized it and even allowed it to occur.

That is the path on which Montgomery is starting as we plan our own urban transition. Obviously, we are much bigger and more varied than Arlington. The lesson to be learned is not one of density, but one of process, and of result: Arlington's urban transition has lived up to expectations on many levels. It is generally supported by the populace even while it is highly profitable to developers.

Montgomery's goal for its community discussion should be the same. Agreement (or disagreement) is sought from the 160 or so residents and businesspeople working on a vision and implementation strategy that includes which centers should be redeveloped first, and what the overall parameters of size, activity, density and access should be.

Unfortunately, the two remaining roundtables are probably filled (though you should inquire). We in the county's civic groups have requested that the process include a countywide public opinion survey that gives

residents at large the same choices as those offered to participants in the roundtables.

Another observation about Arlington: Lots of people know about the plans and have confidence that plans will be implemented as they expect, that urban centers will expand so much and no more, that benefits will be produced as planned.

With elections approaching, Montgomery residents still have the impression of public plans falling prey to the cozy relationship between officials and the development industry. Replacing that relationship with one between officials and the public seems a distant dream.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

## Clarksburg: Lessons Learned

For months Clarksburg has been the talk of Montgomery County. The discovery that houses there were built too tall and too close together in violation of approved plans sent shock waves through Montgomery's civic, business and government circles. The story was all the more riveting because county planners have a reputation for being the best and have won national and international awards for their work. The first lesson of Clarksburg, then, is that even the best can falter.

The Montgomery County Planning Board and its professional planners regret the shortcomings in the regulatory process that led to mistakes and are committed to reforming the agency. The top levels of the planning department have new leadership and more personnel. The regulatory offices have tightened procedures and are committed to completing internal and external audits of the department. We want to restore public confidence in our ability to provide good stewardship of the county's land.

But Clarksburg is not just a regulatory gaffe. It contains lessons for all the growing jurisdictions in this area — especially those that want to embrace "smart growth."

Smart growth is intended to put the brakes on suburban sprawl, thereby preserving valuable farmland and natural areas for future generations. But because this region is expected to grow by about 1.6 million people in the next 25 years, smart growth also is about deciding where inevitable development will go.

Ideally, new residents should be located where they can use mass transit and in mixed-use communities in which residential, office and retail uses are in proximity. But are the region's planning agencies and regulatory processes up to the task of regulating such growth? Our Clarksburg experience suggests the answer is "not quite yet."

Smart growth relies on higher densities to be successful, which leaves little room for error. A few feet matter, and approved heights and setbacks must be verified both on plans and on the ground.

Clarksburg further taught us that early public input into planning decisions is critical. Smart growth usually means adding density to places where people already live, which was the case in Clarksburg, where a town center was built near a historic community. Henceforth, the planning board will ratchet up its notification process for residents around proposed development sites. It is inviting public comments earlier (and more often) to make more transparent decisions and respond more nimbly to complaints and inquiries.

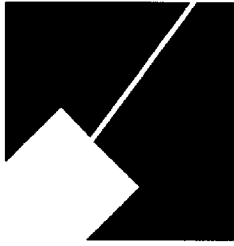
Suburban planners need to think like city planners these days. We need to be expert in redevelopment of older commercial centers, thorough in our outreach to diverse constituencies and meticulous about regulating the design and construction of new projects.

The good news is that smart growth can create vibrant communities, such as Kentlands in Gaithersburg, downtown Silver Spring, Ballston and — when all is said and done — Clarksburg, too.

— Derick Berlage

is chairman of the Montgomery  
County Planning Board.

[mcp-chairman@mncppc-mc.org](mailto:mcp-chairman@mncppc-mc.org)



## **A FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING IN THE FUTURE**

As Montgomery County matures, County citizens and leaders are looking into the future and asking tough questions about how the County might accommodate future growth, where it will be located, and how our communities will look and feel.

Because we are located near Washington, DC – a thriving urban metropolis – we can't expect our future growth to simply come to a halt. Demand for land continues unabated. People want to move here, and employers want to locate their businesses here. Fortunately, ours is a thriving county.

But how will we accommodate future growth? As a County, we are united in protecting the integrity of the Agricultural Reserve, and we certainly want to sustain and enhance the quality of life in communities not planned for growth or substantial redevelopment. However, developable land resources are growing scarce.

So, where will the new residents live? Where will they work? And how will they get around? How should we make choices about future growth? These are the issues that current and future County policy makers must grapple with.

We must begin now to make sound and well thought out decisions about the future of our community. There are no quick and easy answers and these decisions will have an impact on our quality of life for generations.

But we must begin to ask these challenging and controversial questions of ourselves, our public leaders, and especially the residents who already call Montgomery County their home.

The Department of Park and Planning prepared a planning Framework Report intended to spark community dialogue about how best to plan and manage future growth.

The Framework Report chronicles emerging land use and market changes. It recognizes that most large landholdings outside of the Agricultural Reserve are almost fully developed. It envisions that future growth will primarily be in the form of community-scaled redevelopment and infill away from the Reserve.

The Framework Report presents a vision of Montgomery County in transition from a largely auto-dependent suburb into a more urban form with mixed-use,

transit-connected centers located along shared-use boulevards, major transportation routes and transit corridors. It implements our General Plan, "...On Wedges and Corridors " by capturing future development in a more focused pattern of sustainable growth that conserves land and energy.

Growth in the County will continue, but planning policies must evolve so that future growth produces more mixed-use communities where County residents and business can thrive in the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century--

- The rate of development will slow: greater attention must be paid to each new project and how it fits into its surroundings.
- The focus of planning will shift from large master and sector plans to smaller-scale planning and plan amendments to manage growth that is directed inward and to some extent upward.
- Some existing retail and business centers should become genuine centers for their communities- more urban in character, accommodating to pedestrians, with a wider mix of use including- housing, community public buildings, community serving retail, and vital public spaces.
- The outward expansion of infrastructure will give way to planning facilities and amenities to enhance redeveloped centers and surrounding existing neighborhoods.
- The County remains committed to the stability of the countryside, parkland, Agricultural Reserve, and established residential neighborhoods.

As an initial step in developing new 21<sup>st</sup> Century policies, community and business leaders along with public officials and planners are embarking on a "centers and boulevard" initiative to examine the County's commercial centers and major transportation routes, with the goal of renovating some of them into vibrant community centers located along grand boulevards, with attractive public spaces, and easily accessible from surrounding neighborhoods and to each other by public transport.

Two Community Roundtables will be scheduled .to provide an opportunity for County residents to begin exploring a vision for future communities and developing planning approaches that provide the greatest improvement in the quality of life for all our citizens in a mature, more urbanized landscape.

The results of these Roundtables will be presented to the Planning Board and the County Council May and provide guidance and direction for future planning.

**QUESTIONS? Call Park and Planning at 301.495.2118**