

Sea Change Recommended In Montgomery Growth Policy

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Montgomery County planners are proposing a new vision for managing the county's growth, offering discounts to developers who build close to public transit, provide affordable housing and construct environmentally friendly buildings.

The [proposal](#), which the county's Planning Board will begin to assess tomorrow, would reduce the fees builders and developers pay if they adopt principles of smart growth that include getting residents and commuters out of their cars and into urban centers with stores and basic services near jobs. The approach is being pitched as an alternative to the traditional methods employed by the county's legally binding growth policy, which discourages construction if there is too much traffic or not enough classrooms.

"In the past, our growth policy has been based on what you cannot do," said Royce Hanson, chairman of the Planning Board, who has pushed for the approach.

Instead, he said, the county, a popular destination for biosciences and tech firms, should look for ways to allow growth while trying to ensure a high quality of life for those already in place. Montgomery will grow, one way or another, but the proposal will help those who already live and work in the county, as well as those moving in, he believes.

Montgomery's population is nearing 1 million and is expected to grow by 200,000 residents in the next two decades. County officials face major challenges figuring out how to make room for newcomers who might be arriving with the expansion of Bethesda's naval hospital or moving to the area because of its well-regarded schools and its proximity to jobs.

The staff proposal is likely to generate substantial debate this summer as the planning board readies a final proposal to send to the County Council.

It includes a conscious effort to minimize the role traffic jams play in limiting growth and instead allows traffic to grow with new housing and jobs. At the same time, the proposal tries to encourage construction closer to the county's 12 Metrorail stations and other public transportation through a system of financial incentives and discounts on impact fees.

"In the short term, there will be more congestion," said planning director Rollin Stanley, who led the staff effort to revamp the policy. "But we are setting up an ability for that pattern to change over time."

County Council member Marc Elrich (D-At large), who two years ago tangled with Hanson over what he said was a laissez-faire attitude towards traffic, remains worried. "The new proposed policy basically ignores what it does to existing residents to benefit whatever future development is planned," he said.

Jim Humphrey, head of the Montgomery County Civic Federation's land use committee, said he is concerned that the proposed changes would decrease the county's income from builders at a time when the treasury is lean. "We already face a \$370 million shortfall for the next fiscal year," he said.

The proposal hit a major stumbling block Monday night, when school system demographer Bruce Crispell projected extensive school crowding in areas served by Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Clarksburg and Seneca Valley high schools. That forced the planning board to impose a one-year building moratorium in those areas beginning July 1 for anyone without approved plans. Because of projected crowding in nine other high schools, the board also approved a plan to require additional payments from developers in neighborhoods served by Walter Johnson, Northwest, Northwood, Paint Branch, Quince Orchard, Richard Montgomery, Rockville, Wheaton and Walt Whitman high schools.

Hanson said there was little the board could do since current growth law requires a moratorium when schools are projected to be too crowded.

Gigi Godwin, president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, said the system should be changed.

"We are not going to put up a 'Keep Out' sign," Godwin told the planning board Monday night. She said the moratorium will discourage companies clamoring to come to Montgomery to be near the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, the National Institute of Standards in Gaithersburg and the Food and Drug Administration, near downtown Silver Spring. The county also is trying to attract other federal agencies, she said.

In an era of continually tight county and state budgets, getting more money for school construction has proved a challenge. Stanley said school officials should consider ways to build on smaller lots.

The proposed growth policy will be aired in two public hearings this summer and in public planning board discussion sessions. The board is expected to vote on a plan by the end of next month. The County Council will then take it up in the fall, holding its own hearings and discussion sessions before voting by late November.

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