

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Al Tucker, President, 2015

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Over the summer, the CEPA planning committee met to consider the activities to be undertaken for the upcoming year. As a result, the committee agreed that CEPA should continue its focus on the two signature issues in Maryland:

1. The future of our drinking water.
2. The limits of population growth.

Clearly, the availability of water will be a key factor limiting population growth. The Code of Maryland authorizes the Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) to deny water appropriations for development based on the availability of water. However, there appear to be several factors hindering the implementation of those policies that affect the status of both these issues. Both will require significant policy development and changes in our current approaches to coordinate sound land and water use planning.

Growth continues to be the thorny topic. Without further understanding, it often conflates population growth (more people) and economic growth (increased well-being). Both are voracious consumers of natural resources. In the suburban counties of Southern Maryland, those resources are primarily land and water. The counties' tax bases depend primarily on people, and their economic development depends on residential development, primarily low density suburban sprawl, which consumes land and water. Here, economic development does not lead to increased well-being, but to degradation of quality of life. These conditions don't have to continue. Other places like Singapore and Israel are net zero consumers of freshwater with extremely limited land resources. Economic development has not been hindered either, as their economies have adapted to the efficient use of land with increased population densities. In other words, these places have adapted their fundamental infrastructure to meet the needs of increased population density in sustainable ways.

We are beginning to see signs that we are approaching the limits of our local environment. The very fact that we have to manage stormwater shows us that our natural ecosystems cannot provide the services they did decades ago. But our approaches to solutions do not address the fundamental problem of the lack of undeveloped land (mostly forests) and limited water resources. Building more subdivisions requires more land for stormwater treatment facilities and more water use thus creating a never ending cycle of resource destruction.

We must make fundamental changes in policy at the state level. The basic form of Maryland government devolves final decisions on development to local jurisdictions. The Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) offers advice, planning and analysis, but the final decisions and implementation are local. The legislature passed the Smart Growth Initiative in 1998 with incentives of direct funding to Priority Funding Areas. In a recent report¹, pre and post analysis shows no significant shift of development to the Priority Funding Areas and that the incentives are used mainly to fund projects that would not be economically feasible on their own. The MDP policies for Sustainable Growth present an oxymoron, because that growth cannot be sustained without ending in system collapse. Current policies continue to conflate population growth with economic growth and do not address the fundamental issue of how to accommodate more people on less land with dwindling water resources.

Planning and implementation needs to be done on a regional scale, and the time frame for each plan needs to be extended. The current 10 year horizon of General Development Plans is far too shortsighted. Regional water usage shows that one county's usage affects the water availability in neighboring counties. However, without knowledge of the long-term sustainability of an aquifer for a 20 to 30 year period, future water availability cannot be predicted. Currently, MDE issues water permits on a permit by permit basis, essentially first come first served, for a county's 10 year plan. MDE issues the permit, but the responsibility of supplying water remains with the county. This will be a problem in Charles County where current estimates of groundwater are insufficient to meet projected growth.

Individual counties do not have the resources to address these complex issues. They need to cooperate to find solutions that address changes in infrastructure to accommodate more people. They should form regional coalitions based on the availability of their resources and plan for their common good.

Over the coming year CEPA will explore these two signature issues in depth to provide more clarity on the underlying problems and the solutions that could provide improvement in the quality of life for future generations.

1. Maryland Department of Planning presentation, "Summary of Single-Family Residential Development Activity in Maryland Inside & Outside of Priority Funding Areas", (2012), <http://www.mdp.state.md.us/msdc/>

PFA/Resid_Growth/Parcel%20Analysis_2012/Improved%20Single%20Family%20Residential%20Parcels_2012.pdf

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