

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*By Al Tucker*



### **The Conundrums of Growth**

As Anne Arundel and Calvert Counties embark on the revisions to their General Development Plans, it is the issues associated with “growth” that have become the citizen’s foremost concern. These counties face difficult choices, or conundrums, on how to handle growth. Some say growth is necessary to support the economic well-being of the population. Others believe growth has negative consequences, especially the future degradation of natural resources with the concomitant loss of ecosystems services. These two choices conflict with one another. As a consequence, we need to search for an alternative that supports a more sustainable solution

for all.

For the suburban and exurban counties, like Anne Arundel and Calvert, population growth pressure is inevitable as the DC and Baltimore metro areas expand. People have to live somewhere, and the job of county planners is to figure out where to put them. Planners face several competing challenges, the seeds of which were sown a century ago. In 1927 the Maryland Legislature first authorized incorporated municipalities over 10,000 inhabitants to control land-use by defining districts that regulated height, the number of stories, size of buildings, residential density, location, and use of buildings. Prior to this time, attempts at regulation were tested in the courts and often decided in favor of the plaintiff, citing that they deprive “property owners of rights and privileges protected by the Constitution of the State.” We still hear echoes of the court challenges today. In 1926 the Supreme Court upheld the right of communities to enact zoning.

The population pressure that gave rise to zoning was similar then as it is today. The main purpose of zoning was and is to preserve quality-of-life. Land-uses that produced obnoxious effects like noise, smell, smoke, etc. were relegated to districts away from residential districts. With the advent of localized transportation (cars and trucks) communities grew rapidly since their services did not need to be co-located within them. The vast availability of open land meant that these uses could be far removed from residential areas. But the improved quality-of-life led to the rapid expansion of municipalities and the eventual encroachment on districts with offensive uses.

Further restrictions were then placed on these uses, often requiring new technology to mitigate the problems. Today, we accept that all land carries a zoning designation that determines its use. Today, the only recourse to change a classification is for local authorities to up-zone or convince an administrative hearing that the original classification was a mistake.

In suburban counties, rapid population increases led to the depletion of almost all developable land with open space being mostly the unbuildable land. Planners gave little regard to the environmental impact that population density would have. The technologies that enabled improved quality-of-life a century ago have become the main impediment to improving quality-of-life today. Autos and trucks enabled separation of land-uses, but now clog roads that cannot accommodate the increased traffic. Transportation has become the main issue in these counties. It dictates the economic landscape and the well-being of residents (cf., Transportation access is one of the dictates for locating the new Amazon HQ). People today require mobility because economic centers come and go, but modes of transportation and residential districts have not accommodated these shifts.

People prefer the quality-of-life of their current residences. This preference and the lack of developable land lead to demographic stratification and gentrification. Developers usually design new economic centers to maximize revenue for investors and governments with little consideration for the mix of people to support them. As a result, most workers will need to commute by a century old method, the car.

What is clear is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find land to preserve basic ecosystem services to control stormwater runoff, to ensure aquifer recharge, and to improve air quality. To compensate for a portion of these losses, these counties now charge environmental utility fees. At the last CEPA forum, Dr. Elliott Campbell estimated that the current open space in Anne Arundel County provides \$353 million per year in services for stormwater and nutrient reduction. As more land is developed, this amount is reduced, and fees will need to increase to compensate for the loss. In Anne Arundel County, the remediation of failing septic fields to meet the nutrient reduction goals for the Bay remains among the largest unfunded costs.

Exurban counties face a different, yet related question. Should they make more land available for development? More than two decades ago, Calvert County restricted the number of family units to 37,000. They placed a priority on open space over suburban sprawl. The county instituted a system of transferring development rights to compensate large landowners for the reduction in value of their land. But, as the county reaches the growth limit, the conflict between

economic interests and environmental quality-of-life interests arises again. As in the suburban counties, when growth becomes limited, gentrification and demographic stratification will occur.

From a global viewpoint, I think most environmentally oriented citizens recognize the need for action. But when it comes to local land-use issues, we become myopic. We lack the information to make informed decisions. Every citizen needs to know how their land-use impacts the region where they live. The current approach to development ignores the impact of the loss of habitat, forests, and open space. It also ignores the non-local impact of an additional person, e.g., an auto requires 4 times its area for impervious surface (additional shopping centers, parking lots, schools, and expanded roadways.)

Smartgrowth was touted as a way forward, but little was done to incentivize it. The transition from concept to action never occurred. The main idea was that growth should be concentrated in economic centers, where the infrastructure already existed that could supply basics like water, sewer, and energy. Its main failing was that it was viewed as the answer to economic revitalization of blighted, industrial areas, which required the repair and replacement of expensive infrastructure. Hence, building costs favored non-smartgrowth areas and development of raw land.

How do we, the general public, understand the complexities of interactions among the myriad of competing economic, societal, and environmental consequences? Without guidance, most of us choose based on what we can afford. Hence, the primary driver of land-use is economic, while societal and environmental choices become secondary. But societal and environmental impacts are the primary drivers that govern quality-of-life.

In the search for a more sustainable solution to accommodate growth, citizens need to know the true cost of growth. This cost must include not only the cost to build infrastructure but also the cost to repair and replace it. It should also include the cost of degrading the environment and the societal impact. These economic costs are not hypothetical but real. Each additional person needs water, sewer, energy, transportation, etc. which consume ecosystem services.

Planners have tremendous amounts of data available to them. Various aspects can be studied independently, but the impact of the interdependence of the variables that quantify quality-of-life is lacking. At our 2016 Forum Dr. Elliott Campbell presented the concept of the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI). The GPI provides citizens and policymakers insight into how our environment, society, and economy affect the well-being of people. The GPI is designed to measure sustainable economic welfare rather than just economic activity. To accomplish this, the GPI uses three simple underlying principles for its methodology: (1) Account for income inequality, (2) Include non-market benefits from the economy, environment, and society that are not included in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and (3) Identify and account for costs such as environmental degradation, human health effects, and loss of leisure time.

While this approach gives an aggregate overview of quality-of-life for the county, the underlying data could also be studied at a community level to assess their quality-of-life issues. From these local assessments, regional needs could be developed. Without guiding principles, though, the needs cannot be translated into an action plan or General Development Plan.