

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Al Tucker



Hopefully, you will be able to attend our 2016 Forum on the “Unsustainable Spiral of Growth.” As I mentioned in a previous newsletter (Winter 2016), attempting to limit population growth in the Bay region will become a more difficult task as the national economy improves. The environmental impact of an additional person not only subtracts from the passive natural ecosystem services provided by open space, forests and wetlands, but it also adds to infrastructure services and costs that local governments must actively provide. In exurban counties, like Anne Arundel and those in Southern MD, that leads to more traffic, larger wastewater treatment plants with enhanced nutrient removal technology, higher rates of conversion of agricultural land, forests and wetlands to “sprawl,” and to adverse fiscal impacts when tax revenues are insufficient to cover the long term hidden costs of providing public

services.

Since these concerns transcend more than CEPA's environmental issues, we have partnered with other organizations (Growth Action Network, League of Conservation Voters, 1000 Friends of MD, and The Environmental Center at Anne Arundel Community College) to present a more balanced discussion of the problems caused by GROWTH in the exurban counties.

The problems fall into three main categories:

- Fiscal - the ability to pay for current infrastructure maintenance and its replacement
- Environmental/Social - the loss of ecosystem services caused by low-density land-use and the subsequent impact on “quality-of-life.”
- Political - the lack of political will to adequately address the above issues.

Modern society depends critically on its infrastructure to promote well-being and the quality-of-life that we have come to expect. We take for granted that the air we breathe is pure, that the water we drink is clean, that our waste and detritus is disposed of sanitarily, that the energy that allows us freedom of movement are all available without consequences. More than two centuries ago, all these basic services were provided by our ecosystems. In modern society, what was provided naturally now must be provided with man-made services that have long-term recurring costs for maintenance and replacement. Water delivery systems, wastewater treatment plants, streets and highways basic to our way of life must be maintained, repaired and renewed at the end of their lifetimes. This leads to the fundamental question: Are local governments adequately planning, conserving our remaining ecosystem services, and funding current and future infrastructure to accommodate future growth?

The fiscal issues actually supersede the environmental issues. In the exurban counties, low-density residential sprawl predominates. The high fixed cost of infrastructure means that higher density development spreads the cost over more residents and lowers per resident costs. However, study after study has shown that even tax revenue from these properties is insufficient to cover the cost of maintenance and replacement. This discrepancy creates an unsustainable spiral as new development creates new infrastructure that must be maintained and eventually replaced. Some counties charge impact fees that must be spent on new infrastructure to support new development. While this may appear to be “free” to taxpayers (since the cost is borne by the new residents), future costs must be borne by all taxpayers when the infrastructure needs to be replaced. Some counties do not even cover all the up-front costs. Anne Arundel, for example, charges only 80%, of the estimated costs. Even Adequate Public Facilities Ordinances which should provide a relief for excess growth contain loopholes that only delay growth at best. In Anne Arundel County, a developer need only wait 6 years to proceed if the infrastructure is not in place. As a result, development is driven by the economic priorities of developers, not the well-being of residents who have to bear the future costs of the added infrastructure.

What has happened to our environment and social well-being in the meantime? Between 1970 and 1994, under the prevailing low-density trends in development, the Chesapeake Bay area population grew by 26 percent while vehicle miles travelled increased by 105 percent. Now vehicles contribute more than one third of the nitrogen deposition to the Bay watershed. Additionally, the census records that county residents are experiencing longer and longer commuting times. Longer travel times take away from family and recreational times, which studies have shown impact health adversely. Also, stormwater and wastewater utility fees give us the impression that nitrogen is being removed; yet air pollution continues to deposit nitrogen directly on the Bay. More automobiles require more roads just to maintain a level of service. Yet, experience shows that the pent-up demand causes the improvement to be only temporary. Not only does nitrogen pollution increase with more autos, the area they cover increases the county's impervious surface by a factor of four. This leads to more stormwater run-off. This example is but one of many to illustrate the unintended consequences of pursuing low-density development. One could go on and on with even this example, but I think you get the picture.

Thus, current policies that encourage low-density, auto-centric growth are perversely creating a false impression that all is well. It is time for change. The current General Development Plan for Anne Arundel County is due for revision in 2019. Now is the time for citizens to prepare themselves with as much information as they can gather to address these issues. Processes and policies need changing. It can be done; the recent success in Charles County show that citizens can make a change. There a [coalition of like-minded organizations](#)¹ achieved the following:

- **Saved** 88,000 acres of Maryland Department of Natural Resources' GreenPrint Targeted Ecological Areas from rural development
- **Stopped** an estimated 339 major residential subdivisions on highly polluting septic systems in GreenPrint areas
- **Prevented** an estimated 123 major new subdivisions from being built in nine MDE-designated High Quality Watersheds
- **Protected** the headwaters of the Port Tobacco River, the Mattawoman stream valley and much of the Mattawoman watershed with a new Watershed Conservation District designation
- **Expanded** the Priority Preservation Area, initially limited to farmland, to include forestland in western Charles County
- **Prevented** the expenditure of an estimated \$2 billion on new road construction and future maintenance by the public and private sectors.
- **Focused** development in the County's existing Priority Funding Areas
- **Reduced** the sprawling Development District from 52,220 acres to 22,189 acres
- **Cut** the projected population growth rate in half to 1%

Please join us on October 14th, 7 pm, at the Anne Arundel Community College. The Forum will feature land-use planning and development, including a lively panel discussion moderated by Terry Smith on this important topic.

UNFETTERED DEVELOPMENT AT ANY COST MUST BE STOPPED

¹Charles County Victory: Smart Growth = Pollution Prevention, 8/2016

<http://www.friendsofdmd.org/images/PDFReportsAndPublications/Charles%20County%20victory%20%20Pollution%20prevention%2008.7.16.pdf>
