

AGENDA ITEM #5

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

FROM: Melissa Cuiña Banach, Chief, Strategic Planning
John Carter, Chief, Community-Based Planning
Karl Moritz, Chief, Research and Technology

SUBJECT: Revitalizing Centers, Reshaping Boulevards, and Creating Great Public Spaces: Planning Framework, A Working Draft

RECOMMENDATION: Discussion.

As Montgomery County matures and approaches build out, 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. Ours is a thriving county, indeed.

But how will we accommodate future growth? As a County, we are united in protecting the integrity of the Agricultural Reserve, and we certainly do not envision redeveloping existing residential neighborhoods. But, developable land resource is 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.

Making sound and well thought out decisions about the future of our community will take many years. There are no quick and easy answers.

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.

We suggest that County citizens and leaders open an inclusive dialogue now about how best to plan and manage future growth.

That's why we have prepared a working draft of a planning Framework Report, which chronicles key development trends, and emerging land use and market changes. It offers a new planning perspective that captures development potential through a focused pattern of sustainable growth that conserves land and energy. It presents a range of options, opportunities and a platform for further discussion.

The Framework Report suggests that developing large tracts of land in the County is almost over and that future growth will be in the form of redevelopment and infill. This strategy will require a shift to small area planning, more intensive community outreach, and a greater emphasis on building great public spaces for community members to gather.

The Framework Report may help us begin a challenging, yet necessary dialogue about the future of Montgomery County.

Throughout the fall and winter, the Department intends to sponsor a series of workshops to open dialogue, expand understanding, and engage our citizens, elected officials, government agency representatives, and national experts in a discussion of the challenges associated with planning in a maturing county.

This effort will culminate in a Community Speak -- Out scheduled for January 15, which could be modeled along the lines of the Regional Reality Check, an interactive workshop designed to take stock of the pace of development and growth.

We will report back to the Planning Board in February 2006 what we learned from the community --and those lessons will help us define what next steps we might take in this thought process.

In addition, the Department has been on a fact-gathering mission. Fact gathering is vital to expanding the knowledge base and skill sets among staff to address future planning challenges. The Framework Report suggests that future growth will be occur primarily in the form of redevelopment and infill which will require a shift to small area planning, more intensive community outreach, greater emphasis on public spaces that have direct community benefit, and implementation strategies that require closer collaboration and new alliances among government agencies to assure delivery of public facilities.

As part of this fact-gathering mission, the Department is working on a Mature Commercial Center Study.

Update on the Mature Commercial Center Study

The Mature Commercial Center Study is intended to build a "toolbox" of information resources and skill sets among the staff at Park and Planning to effectively address planning and regulatory issues in and around commercial centers. Among the objectives: to understand the perspectives of key players, including landowners, neighbors and development industry experts.

Among the findings so far of the study is that each center has common, as well as unique elements. So while there is a body of knowledge that can be applied to each redevelopment scenario, there are no cookie-cutter remedies. For example, one question that a planner might ask: is a landowner's request for additional density reasonable? The answer to that question will not only takes into account market demand for the site but also the profitability of the current uses of the site and whether additional density is compatible with the adjacent neighborhood.

Specific activities and products include:

- *Inventory of Commercial Centers:* Staff completed an inventory of the County's commercial centers that includes a variety of data elements (size, year built, ownership, assessment, maps of center and adjacent neighborhood) to enable analysis of individual centers as well as to be able to characterize the state of commercial centers countywide.
- *Urban Land Institute (ULI) Technical Assistance Panel Briefing Book:* This book was prepared by Park and Planning staff as a resource for the ULI Technical Assistance Panel, held in July. In addition to the Inventory of Commercial Centers, this book is a compilation of information resources on the subject of commercial center redevelopment, its potential in Montgomery County and experiences in other communities. The book is available to the public.
- *ULI Technical Assistance Panel Report:* This report, presented to the Planning Board in September, provides the perspectives of development industry representatives on the potential of redeveloped centers and the market realities that they face. The panel selected some Montgomery County centers solely for the purpose of illustrating concepts and design options. The panel suggested that there is strong industry interest in redeveloping commercial centers in Montgomery County and market demand is high for additional housing and retail. This report is available on the Department's website, www.mc-mncppc.org.
- *Comment on Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Recommendations:* The ULI TAP made a number of eye-opening recommendations. Staff has begun reviewing these and will test some of them for validity before using them as a basis for making policy recommendations.

- *Space Requirements of Typical Shopping Center Tenants:* Staff has compiled profiles of the various types of retail tenants, including space needs, market areas, and other requirements. These profiles will help staff determine the market feasibility of various redevelopment options, commercial center configurations, etc.
- *Profile of Shopping Center's Market Area:* Staff has compiled demographic profiles for the market areas of each of Montgomery County's commercial centers. These profiles include information that is helpful to planners as well as marketers, and were compiled for one, three, and five-mile radii from each commercial center. Staff has also begun the process of cross-referencing these demographic profiles against typical retailer needs to show what the market might be looking for as centers redevelop. These demographic profiles will be helpful in selecting representatives of the community to engage in focus groups or other community outreach efforts.
- *Best Practices/Industry Standards and Trends:* Staff is compiling a database/reference library of current thinking about commercial centers, including examples of "what worked/what didn't" from a community and market perspective. In addition to collecting reference materials, staff is reviewing these examples to glean lessons learned from shopping center redevelopment projects and search for commonalities in successful mixed use centers, particularly as it relates to the public sector role in making the difference.
- *Recommendations for Changes to Commercial Zones:* A key "product" or result of the Study is a set of recommendations for revising commercial zones in the County. The existing commercial zones lack site plan review, have limited requirements for amenities, and provide a narrow range of allowed uses. Staff will propose zoning text amendments for public discussion and review by the Planning Board and the County Council by the end of the year, as scheduled.
- *Commercial Centers Focus Groups:* A unique series of focus groups were conducted to gain input from residents not usually part of the planning process and to develop a prototype focus group approach to better determine community needs when redeveloping commercial centers in the future. Comments heard during the focus groups included: strong desires for better site planning (poor site planning results in uncivil behavior in parking lots!) and quality design of shopping centers, unique shopping centers reflecting community character, unique stores that respond to local needs, improved public access, better pedestrian access, and comfortable safe places that encourage sociability.