



Calvert County NEWS

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Board of Commissioners

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Open Letter from the Calvert County Board of County Commissioners

PRINCE FREDERICK, Md. – Dec. 12, 2017 – Vigorous debate is a hallmark of healthy civic life, and it has been heartening to see the community weigh in as we work to update the Calvert County Comprehensive Plan. Since we began the process in the fall of 2015, hundreds of residents have attended meetings and offered thousands of comments on a document that will encompass our ideals for Calvert County.

It is unfortunate that a special interest group recently published information that misrepresents facts in order to distort the vision of the Comprehensive Plan. We feel obligated to address the inaccuracies in order to set the record straight and ensure residents are not misled.

Recent criticisms center on two false perceptions: the plan promotes overly ambitious county growth and it is being rushed through without proper public input. This misinformation is a disservice to county staff who have worked on the plan and the many residents who have participated in the process for more than a year.

Let's set the record straight. Future county growth is dependent on a wide variety of factors. It is important to understand that the Comprehensive Plan is a visionary document – a snapshot of how the community sees the county's future. It does not create the policies or regulations that would directly impact development. To use one example, some see the plan's vision of expanding town centers as driving unwanted growth. The draft Comprehensive Plan, however, simply holds that growth is best directed to the town centers that can accommodate it.

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The plan's proposed Prince Frederick Town Center expansion would include areas already developed or that are zoned appropriately. It would add flexibility to future growth with the goal of creating the vibrant mixed-use development residents envision. The Comprehensive Plan would not automatically expand the town center boundaries. That can only be done through zoning map amendments requiring a fully open public process.

In fact, public input is a vital part of county government initiatives – especially for the Comprehensive Plan update. Public participation in the plan update process started in June 2016 and will continue through the public hearing tentatively set for spring 2018 prior to adoption. Beyond that, any changes in zoning regulations to meet Comprehensive Plan visions will involve public processes stretching well into 2019. To suggest this is being rushed is simply false. Staff from the county Department of Planning & Zoning is responsive to any and all residents who wish to offer feedback. The plan draft, background information, scheduling and much more are available at www.co.cal.md.us/FutureCalvert. The public conversation is open and ongoing.

Despite the high-profile negativism of some, we are thankful for the community involvement in this important process. That includes dissenting opinions, but only when they are based on facts.

Below is a point-by-point discussion addressing recent misleading *assertions*.

1. The plan is missing the section on implementation of its visions.

True, but ... The implementation items in the draft plan are actually incorporated under each goal and objective throughout the chapters. These bullet points will be gathered into an implementation section once all public input on the first draft is received and they are ranked into short, medium and long-term items.

2. The county should extend the comment period so the 'complete' plan with implementation items is available for public review.

Not necessary. The implementation items have been in the draft and available for public review, just not in a separate implementation section. Public review and input is open and ongoing until the BOCC adopts the final version.

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3. No traffic studies were conducted for the plan.

True, but they are not part of comprehensive plans. Traffic studies are done for specific projects, not for visionary planning documents like the comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan has a long-range outlook. Traffic studies can only predict shorter term impacts.

4. A commissioners' traffic projection was not included in the plan.

False, for a couple of reasons. Neither the BOCC nor county staff has developed traffic projections for the comprehensive plan. The reference may be to a state study conducted for the widening of Route 2-4 in Prince Frederick. Again, traffic studies are for short-term projects, not long-term planning documents like the comprehensive plan.

5. New developer-installed sewer systems needed for future growth would be taken over by the county for maintenance, leading to unknown future costs.

False. There is no requirement for local government to take over the maintenance of developer-installed water/sewer systems. The Maryland Department of the Environment is the regulatory body overseeing these systems. It performs inspections to ensure they are properly maintained. County government will step in if a system is in danger of failing; this is a basic health and safety issue. If this occurs, users of the system would cover the costs of maintenance or replacement – not county taxpayers.

6. The Comprehensive Plan draft does not base population growth on infrastructure costs.

This is an irrelevant distinction. As visionary documents, comprehensive plans do not address the costs of infrastructure driven by population growth. Controls are built in through excise taxes that fund roads, schools, recreation and solid waste services, along with adequate public facilities regulations that require roads and schools to be adequate before development is allowed.

7. The Comprehensive Plan draft weakens land preservation by reducing Transferable Development Rights (TDRs).

This is a misleading scare tactic. The TDR program is still intact and the state growth tier structure directs growth to town centers to prevent major development outside of growth areas. There are many factors surrounding decisions on land preservation, including the recent recession. The greater factor is the value of TDRs – not the number per dwelling unit – and the market drives the value. It's a constant balancing act.

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8. The plan proposes to expand town centers and villages while eliminating appearance standards.

True and false. The draft plan does propose to expand some town centers and proposed villages. Comprehensive plans do not include appearance standards; plans are not regulatory documents. Appearance standards are regulations enacted through zoning ordinances.

9. There are no studies conducted to measure impact of the expansion of town centers and villages.

This again misrepresents the nature of comprehensive plans. They are visionary planning documents, not detailed regulatory structures. The plan recommends expansions of some town centers and proposed villages but does not automatically expand the boundaries. That can only be done through zoning amendments which involves a full public process. At that time the BOCC could require studies to assess the impact.

10. The plan is missing the Heritage and Government sections.

True, but ... The draft plan is organized based upon elements outlined in state law. The Heritage section is gone but could be added if directed by the Planning Commission. The Government section is gone but many of its elements are included in the Community Facilities chapter.

11. The update process for the Comprehensive Plan is being rushed.

False. Public participation in the plan update process started in June 2016 and will continue through the public hearing prior to final adoption. Beyond that, any changes in zoning regulations to meet Comprehensive Plan visions will involve public processes stretching well into 2019. Staff from the county Department of Planning & Zoning is responsive to any and all residents who wish to offer feedback. The plan draft, background information, scheduling and much more are available at www.co.cal.md.us/FutureCalvert. The public conversation is open and ongoing.

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