

Cohen: Leveraging what makes Carroll County special

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Other Voices

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As you may have read, the Board of County Commissioners has returned the Freedom Area Comprehensive Plan to the planning and zoning commission. The board is asking for additional, more detailed information that the commissioners — and residents — need to evaluate the plan’s value as a construct that will guide county development over the next decade or more.

The current version of the plan is woefully inadequate to the task. Its section on “land use” fails to describe the methodologies that were used to estimate the need for residential, commercial and industrial properties. Its recommendations are vague. And there is no analysis of the plan’s impact on established neighborhoods and commerce, on employment and population and on the costs to the county for infrastructure and public services. College students, with nothing more than their grades at stake, routinely write papers that are more thoughtful and sophisticated.

The county’s planning and zoning commission and the planning department have decided that the secret to growing the county’s population and tax base is high density, “affordable” housing and large store commercialization in Eldersburg. Not incidentally, Eldersburg is the only major Designated Growth Area in the county that isn’t incorporated. Residents are pretty much defenseless against whatever the county government decides should go there. Incorporated cities write their own comprehensive plans and zoning maps. In effect, when it comes to the all-important task of planning for development and growth, doing it in Eldersburg is the county government’s only option.

So, are high-density residential and large store commercial development the way to grow the county’s population and tax base? No, they’re not.

For one thing, the county’s approach is a supply-side, “Field of Dreams” strategy. Zone more properties for high-density housing and large store commercial development and, miraculously, people will come. If only it were that easy. Unfortunately, this isn’t how local economic growth works.

The second problem is that the county’s comprehensive plan pays no attention to recent history. In the 35 years between 1970 and 2005, the county’s population grew by over 140 percent from approximately 69,500 to 167,000 people. Unfortunately, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the county has added only 701 people in the decade since then.

There are lots of reasons why the county is no longer growing, but one thing we know for sure: The 140 percent growth between 1970 and 2005 wasn't indigenous. It happened because people moving to the region and leaving Baltimore were looking for someplace nice to live, to raise their children in safe neighborhoods with good schools or to retire. They certainly didn't move to Carroll County to shop in big box stores or wait in traffic on over-crowded streets and roads. Higher density housing and big store commercial development aren't progress. If we are going to be honest, they are uninspired planning that miss the entire point.

If anything, the lack of growth in Carroll County over the last decade may actually be the planning department's fault. Instead of helping to attract large, higher-paying employers without compromising the quality of life that had been Carroll County's most compelling feature, the planners couldn't have done more to make Carroll County ordinary if they had tried.

Common sense planning principals like "stay with what works" and "don't fix what isn't broken" come to mind. Remanding the Freedom plan for further work shouldn't just be about details missing from a document with the word "Plan" on the cover. Much more importantly, it should be about whether the county has the good sense to leverage the best it has to offer or continues to chip away at what once made living in Carroll County so special.

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