

**PLANNING FOR MASTER PLAN 2030:
HOW BALTIMORE COUNTY CAN CREATE AN “EQUITABLE GROWTH” ACTION PLAN**

What is the backdrop to our story?

- In 1967, the county adopted the Urban Rural Demarcation Line (“URDL”), which identified the area of the county that could be serviced by city water and sewer. This area is one third of the county, and today 90% of residents live within the URDL.
- While the URDL was an early form of smart growth, it was not enough to push all development into one area and step away. For growth to benefit all, it needs to be well-planned and consistent with a holistic vision of growth that is produced by a vigorous, collaborative and extensive planning process. That is the very reason why we have a master plan.
- Granted, the county did try a “town center” approach, which was supposed to create attractive, mixed-use communities with a suite of amenities. However, the centers became low-density sprawl with little sense of place or connectivity, and with little ability to anchor future growth.
- What made this possible? The ultimate decision-maker on zoning decisions is the county council, and the county council regularly makes these decisions in a way that is (a) on-demand, ad-hoc and project-by-project, (b) often political and emotional and (c) not inclusive of residents. While this is contrary to master plans, the law has allowed it. **This has to stop.**
- At first, the effects of this were not widely felt because the URDL still had greenspace, and greenspace is easier and less expensive to develop. So, the county could build farther out instead of concentrating growth in town centers or reinvesting in older communities. We have now run out of greenspace and are left with redevelopment, which is harder to do.

We are at a breaking point. The effects of this have been far reaching.

Lack of open space: 65% of residences lack access to adequate open space within walking distance of their homes. And none of our 16 inner suburbs are considered walkable according to walkscore.com.

Pollution: All but one of the 14 county watersheds are polluted, and considered “impaired” by the state.

Housing shortage: There is a critical shortage of housing in the county, including housing that is affordable to working families.

Existing housing is old: The median age of county housing is 48 years, compared to 39 years nationally. Almost half of homes were built prior to 1970.

Declining suburbs: Overlooked older suburbs (built after World War II) have continued to decline, reducing our viable housing stock.

Increased housing costs: As supply dwindled, housing costs increased, reaching a decade high for the Baltimore region in March 2021.

More ALICE households: ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) measures the true amount of poverty in an area. ALICE households in Maryland increased by 57% from 2007 to 2018 as a direct result of housing costs.

History of discrimination: The county entered into a 2016 HUD settlement agreement to address its long history of racial discrimination in housing. The county is not on pace to meet its obligations to build affordable homes for low-income African Americans.

Population loss: It is projected that the county will register a population loss for the first time since the 1920 census.

So what do we do? We set a goal.

In view of the current Master Plan process and the pandemic recovery, now is the time for all stakeholders (residents, advocates and developers) to discuss how to reinvest with this goal in mind: *create a predictable and transparent development process so that we can reinvent our suburbs and create attractive, livable and sustainable complete communities with decent, affordable housing options for all.* This is the foundation of an “equitable growth” plan.

But how do we do that? 6 Point Plan!

1. *Master Plan as a Controlling Document, with Proper Sequencing of Land Use Tools:* The county should transform the Master Plan from an aspirational document that can be ignored by decision-makers (councilmembers) into a controlling document that governs future map amendments. This includes changing the sequencing of the Comprehensive Zoning Map Process (“CZMP”) so that it occurs shortly after the Master Plan is adopted at Year 0 and after it is updated at Year 5 (the amending process does not exist now).
2. *By-Right Development:* If the Master Plan process was truly collaborative and extensive, and the Master Plan was legally binding, it makes sense to expand the use of “by-right” development. This means fewer projects would be subject to special discretionary review, which would reduce costs for homebuyers and others. This is critical because the only development left in the URDL is harder and more expensive to do.
3. *Mixed-Use Development:* With its abundance of fully declined suburbs – which do not have the amenities of complete communities and are unconnected to one another – the county must make it easier to reinvest and to redevelop into well-planned, mixed-use communities.
4. *Green Network:* The county should establish a Green Network so that it can improve the connectivity among green hubs, and thereby make the most of the open space, parks, trails and greenways that currently exist.
5. *Simpler, Better Zoning Laws, Regulations and Processes:*
 - a. Wholesale review of zoning laws, regulations and processes to simplify them where possible.
 - b. Reform or replace the “planned unit development” or “PUD” process, which is the primary tool to develop mixed-use projects (including limits on density increases).
 - c. Require zoning bills to have a 90-day period of review and comment by the Planning Department and the Planning Board, after which the council may proceed with a vote.
 - d. Require zoning amendments to have a 30-day review period (council cannot propose such amendments and vote on them at the same meeting).
6. *Updated Community Plans:* The county should allocate resources as necessary to help communities update their local development plans, which should flow up into the Master Plan.

Who is on board?

The groups that have signed on to this effort are listed on the attached signature page.

If you are interested in also lending your name, please let We The People know by contacting Nick Stewart (stewart.nicholas@gmail.com) and Pat Keller (pkeller57@version.net). Nick is an attorney at Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP, and Pat is the county’s former planning director. To learn more, you may review the entire 12-page paper supporting this pamphlet. Please just ask.