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Senior Needs in Downtown Columbia

As the population of Maryland continues to grow, the need for updating the plans for our communities becomes ever more critical. In Howard County, for example, the population will grow from almost 250,000 people in 2000 to about 300,000 in 2010. With normal population increases, combined with external events such as the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) effect, housing options must be explored now.

An additional element that must be incorporated into any updated plan is the fact that the population is not just increasing, but it is growing older. For example, in Howard County, the 55+ population is expected to grow from 19% in 2005 to 24% in 2015 to 31% in 2025. This population has far different needs and wishes than the young, suburban families with children.

In December 2004, Howard County completed its Senior Housing Master Plan. In this Plan, the need for a wide-range of senior housing options was described, and the goal to provide long-time residents of Howard County with appropriate ways to age in place, either in their own homes or in communities nearby, was established.

This Plan set forth specific suggestions for changes in Howard County's land use and zoning laws, as well as building codes, so that the goal set forth in that Plan could be accomplished.

Howard County planners have identified three areas of the County where significant growth may occur: Route 1 Corridor, Route 40 Corridor, and Downtown Columbia. Concepts developed in the Senior Housing Master Plan must be incorporated into the planning for these areas now if we are going to have any chance to meet the housing needs of residents aged 55 and over.

For example, it has long been recognized that a home is not just a home. All of the various services that a homeowner may require must also be readily available based on the abilities of that homeowner. So, transportation services will necessary, as will access to professionals such as health care providers. Groceries and other shopping needs should be proximate to the home.

And there must be a sense of community, of safety, of belonging.

In a typical suburban environment, where homes are built two to an acre, it is difficult to find housing arrangements that will meet our older population's needs. These homes usually have high maintenance requirements, require a car to go shopping, and do not provide the sense of community that a denser community might provide. And the townhouse communities have innumerable steps to negotiate each day. What might be a great environment for kids is not always a great environment for older folks.

The revitalization of downtown Columbia provides some wonderful planning opportunities. Having a better mixture of retail stores, high rise residences, and office buildings, all set in a community that is pedestrian friendly, will promote the type of community that will meet the needs of many older residents. If this type of downtown also attracts younger families, so much the better since maintaining a diverse community will add further to the quality of living downtown.

In order to attain this type of community, there is going to be change. Change is not always comfortable, but sometimes it is necessary. The number of dwelling units for downtown Columbia, for example, will have to be significantly increased beyond any current planning concepts. The nature of downtown will necessarily change from a car-focused experience to a pedestrian-focused community, incorporating mass transit technologies. And, the whole array of goods and services normally available in a typical downtown will have to be made available.

As the public debate surrounding the planning of downtown Columbia evolves, as it will in most of the other communities in the Baltimore-Washington Corridor, the needs and wishes of our older residents really must be addressed in any such process. We must not fail to meet the challenges facing a significant and important part of our community.