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Growth: Uber Déjà Vu!

Growth! The way community leaders and politicians are currently blaming growth for everything from degraded education in our schools to congested roads to ugly neighborhood changes, it sounds like growth has become a dirty word. Is growth really all that bad?

At least since 1980, Howard County has developed and followed General Plans that have controlled and limited growth throughout Howard County. Additionally, in the early 1990's, the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) was publicly constructed, debated and implemented so that future growth would be limited by infrastructure concerns such as schools and roads.

Applicable zoning laws and the APFO, together with the General Plans of 1980, 1990 and 2000, are precisely the reason why Howard County enjoys one of the best school systems in the entire country, one of the highest standards of living in the entire country, and an incomparable quality of life. These outcomes were not an accident.

A little more history. One of the key election issues in the 1990 election campaign between then County Executive Elizabeth Bobo and Dr. Charles Ecker was the management of growth. After Dr. Ecker's victory, one of his first acts as County Executive was to establish a commission to develop an adequate public facilities ordinance. To accomplish his goal of having everyone's voice heard in the process, Dr. Ecker appointed representatives from the Howard County Citizens' Association, Howard County PTA, the Howard County School System, National Association of Industrial and Office Parks, Howard County Homebuilders, The Rouse Company, and others with a vested interest in understanding and managing growth. Dr. Ecker's Commission also included the

heads of the Department of Public Works and the Department of Planning and Zoning, as well as the County Solicitor.

The APFO Commission met for four to six hours a week for six months before putting pen to paper to develop a plan. During this time, the members of the Commission heard from experts about transportation issues, school concerns, public safety factors, and a host of other professionals. Private property rights were balanced against the interests of the public. Howard County's growth history was examined and the salient provisions of the 1990 General Plan was incorporated into the discussions. The whole growth issue was inspected, digested, and, ultimately, was addressed in a comprehensive set of laws that had the full support of all of the members of the APFO Commission, both for themselves and on behalf of their respective organizations.

In large measure, the APFO legislation has worked. New construction for homes in some parts of Howard County is now scheduled out to 2014 or later. School quality is still the highest in the state, and our quality of life remains unmatched.

The core of the growth issue is not so much growth, but the vision for what Howard County is and should be in the future. The upcoming election should be seen as a referendum on whether Howard County is a bedroom community focused on quality of life issues such as schools, roads, and scenic easements, or whether Howard County is a vibrant, economic community that it is a great place to both live and work.

As a bedroom community, housing for people who work in Howard County is not as important as assuring that the county's amenities are maintained at



the highest of levels. So, for example, funding for affordable housing comes in second when compared to funding recreational opportunities. Howard County residents who work outside of the county, therefore, are generally going to be in favor of maintaining Howard County as a bedroom community since they moved to the county for its amenities, not for economic opportunities.

On the other hand, Howard Countians who earn their living in Howard County will want have a pool of good job applicants available, a strong community college for workforce development, housing options for employees, and excellent roads to move around the county, among other things.

The upcoming election will require a close examination of a candidate's position on growth to understand whether it is a bedroom community that is being promised or whether it is a vibrant economic community that is a wonderful place to live that is being promised.