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Commentary on the MNCPPC Preliminary Land Use Plan

by Henry M. Bain, Jr.

"Planning" in Montgomery County has generally meant the protection of established real estate values from new development of a sort that would lessen those values. This philosophy of planning has regarded three kinds of development as potentially harmful to existing values, which consist mainly of single-family houses. These three kinds of development are: commercial use, industrial use, and high-density residential use. The county's policy has been to hold these uses at arm's length in two senses: to allow them only at a distance from single-family dwellings, and to limit the amount of such use (at least, industrial and high-density residential) in the county. The county has been fairly successful in implementing this philosophy of planning. Spot zoning, while not at all uncommon, is less plentiful than in many other places, and the amount of land zoned for apartments and industry has not run as far ahead of demand as it has in many places.

Another philosophy of planning would regulate the character and intensity of land use to achieve broader community objectives, such as preserving open spaces, protecting watersheds, and creating more efficient and livable communities. Efforts in this direction have met with limited success, the most notable (partial) victory being the large-lot zoning of parts of the Potomac and Patuxent watersheds. This philosophy of planning would also make use of a broader range of governmental powers to guide the county's growth, embracing not only controls over use and density, but governmental acquisition of land, taxation, use of public works policies (sewers, transportation, etc.). A first step in this direction has been the enactment of legislation requiring approval by the County Council of the location of major sewer lines.

An example of the differences between these two philosophies may be seen in the attitude to zoning of property at busy intersections. The old philosophy is that, since such property is undesirable for single-family dwellings, it should be zoned commercial, to permit the owner to get a return on his investment and to keep commerce as far as possible from houses. The new philosophy recognizes that the commercial zoning of all four corners of an intersection causes traffic problems and that a properly buffered shopping district can be an asset in a residential area. This philosophy asks why the person who invests in an undesirable piece of real estate shouldn't bear the consequences. However, recognizing the political power of such investors, the new philosophy looks for methods of planning an area as a whole before development, and acquiring with public funds those lands that do not lend themselves to a development that is both profitable and socially desirable.

The Preliminary Plan for Residential Land Use seems to be almost entirely a reflection of the first of these philosophies. There is much concern over the amount of unused apartment zoning, and over the possible increase in densities

in the years to come, while there is practically no effort to define the characteristics of a desirable residential community and to develop plans and tools to create such a community.

The time has come for a new philosophy of planning in Montgomery County. Since the county is and will continue to be predominantly residential, the Residential Land Use plan offers a good opportunity to put the new philosophy into practice. The new philosophy would recognize that:

The county will continue to grow rapidly.

The growth will be so widespread, and the total population will be so large, that planning must do more than protect established values—it must design an integrated structure of dwellings, stores, offices, industry, highways, utilities, schools and parks—a structure that provides an economical, convenient, attractive and safe place in which to live and do business.

To design such an environment, we will need some things we do not now have, including more complete statements of the goals of county development; more complete design, by the county government, of development; and more effective tools for guiding development to realize the design.

Why the emphasis on design? Because only by detailed design of all aspects of the physical environment is it possible for large numbers of people to live well in a relatively small space. The all-important fact is the county's continued growth, which will soon be pushing its population to the half-million mark. It is sheer numbers that are mainly responsible for traffic congestion, loss of open space, problems of sewage disposal, etc. It is sheer numbers that create growing pressures for apartment zoning, and that encourage industry to locate here. Sheer numbers both threaten us with problems such as these, and offer us the prospect of benefits in the form of economies to be gained from providing public services on a large scale, and in the form of economic and cultural opportunities that would not be available in a smaller community.

The new philosophy of planning recognizes that people are going to demand a living environment of much higher quality in years to come. Rising educational levels and increased sensitivity to the environment will make people want better community design; while higher income levels and especially high "discretionary" income will enable them to pay for it. That is, when people have filled their kitchens and basements with consumer goods, they will increasingly ask why they should have to emerge from an attractive and comfortable home into a tawdry and inefficient commercial district when they go shopping. There will probably be a boom in second houses in the Blue Ridge Mountains and on the Eastern Shore, but as those areas are overrun and lose their attractiveness people will strive to create, here at home, the very qualities that make distant woodlands and shores so attractive.

What should the Montgomery County communities of the future look like? We already have the answers in the writings of various city planners, and in a few suburban communities now in existence. There will be a community center with stores, schools and other facilities. There will be dense housing near the center, with gradually diminishing densities out to an open space barrier. There will be little or no through automotive traffic within the community, but good access from nearby highways. There will also usually be an express transit station at the community center. There will be an employment center in the community or nearby.

This, of course, is the garden city plan. It is not a new idea, but the point is that our public taste, our institutions of land development and our economic abilities are all moving us rapidly in this direction. To build and rebuild Montgomery County along these lines is a desirable and a realistic goal, but something more than our present very weak zoning powers and a vague concern over "too many apartments" will be needed if we are to achieve this goal.

The following criticisms of the Residential Land Use plan are offered in the light of the foregoing statement of philosophy.

A. The report is content with a pattern of development that falls far short of the kind of community that we should be striving for.

1. The report pays a compliment to the pattern of development emerging at Damascus. Any merits of this pattern are attributable to the superb site and the fairly high prices of the houses being built there. As far as community design is concerned, Damascus is a miserable failure—a stringtown, extending along the highways as far south as Woodfield, as far southwest as Cedar Grove, and a long way up the road to the north, all to the detriment of the people living there and through motorists alike. The town's shape is apparently dictated by the simple fact that, if you build on a pre-existing county road you don't have to pay for a local street fronting your house.

2. The report accepts and even approves of the stringing of apartment buildings along Sligo Avenue. There could hardly be a worse layout of apartment buildings. Traffic along the narrow avenue will be a real problem, and most of the apartments will be a long and unpleasant walk from stores, public transportation and community facilities. Another example is the report's apparent acceptance of the Pooks Hill type of development—all the disadvantages of apartment living combined with the disadvantages of a remote location necessitating a private bus line.

3. The report apparently accepts the inefficient, dangerous and ugly commercialization of all four corners of rural intersections (such as Ashton and Potomac) instead of calling for development of commercial centers of modern design.

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(continued from page one)

4. The report apparently accepts continued sprawling development in most rural parts of the county on half-acre lots, or naively believes that half-acre zoning will produce the report's proposed pattern of increased density in the seven inner planning areas and non-sprawl in the rural areas. Half-acre zoning will not achieve this result. The report also innocently voices the belief that there is an agricultural economy in the rural areas, that will withstand the pressures of urbanization. In fact, there is hardly any agriculture left in the county. The upper county is a tax-write-off, gentleman's estate, speculative landholding economy. Half-acre sprawl is just about as bad as sprawling development on smaller lots. Incidentally, the report also underestimates the trend to scattershot extending into remote areas such as Poolesville and Brandywine.

5. The report relies on existing towns as the centers of new satellite communities. These are the worst of all places in which to try to create satisfactory community centers. Land is split into many small and separately owned tracts, encumbered with buildings that are too costly to tear down, devoted to industrial and heavy commercial uses, and subject to regulation by local planning commissions independent of the MNCPPC. Even if an attempt were made to develop these towns into centers of suburban communities, it would probably be frustrated by developers and retailers who would build shopping centers elsewhere to avoid the difficulties mentioned above.

6. There is no reference whatsoever to the need for detailed design of new communities in the vicinity of dispersed employment centers. Apparently the haphazard construction of small subdivisions around the Atomic Energy Commission is to be the pattern of the future. It is true, there is a plaintive remark about the need for a detailed development plan for the area around the Andrews Air Force Base—more than ten years after the base began operation!

7. The last criticism may be unfair if the "detailed zoning and land use plans" that the MNCPPC is preparing will fill the need. But the rate of progress in making these plans ap-

pears to be so slow that the damage will be done before such plans are ever completed for some areas. There are 35 planning areas. Detailed plans have been prepared for five, but there will (or should) be another five areas added to the Commission's jurisdiction before long in southern Prince George's County. At 3 or 4 per year, it will take 10 years to finish the job. It is true that some planning areas are already substantially built up. However, many of these are going to need detailed land use plans to guide redevelopment or at least extensive high-density rebuilding. While the report makes a reference to possible redevelopment, there is no evidence that the MNCPPC is doing any work in that direction. It should.

B. There is a lack of goals to guide the planning process.

1. It is time to ask whether metropolitan Washington should grow more to the south and less to the northwest. There would be definite advantages, such as the protection of water supply. The report does not consider such a fundamental question. It accepts the population growth dictated by the Henson Creek sewer, and stops there because of the difficulties in pumping sewage over ridges. Anyway, the report is already outdated by the announced intention of the WSSC to build a sewage treatment plant on Piscataway Creek. Once again, we see that the effective decisions on development are largely made by sanitary, highway, and other agencies, not the planners!

2. Even the allocation of population to individual areas is mostly simply a projection of trends, rather than a planned development. This is especially clear in the discussion of Clinton—low density is recommended because population projections indicate a low population, and because the area is now rural!

3. There is no realization that high density, far from being something to avoid, is a desirable goal. What we need is designed density. The report's concept of "alternating intensities of development" is of no particular value unless the high densities are properly designed neighborhoods or communities. Also, the alternating intensities concept loses much of its value when we realize that many of the low density areas on which the report relies are Federal reservations, useful for defining communities but of little use for recreation and other low density use by the general public.

C. A major effort should be made to provide the county government with the tools for carrying out a residential land use plan—this problem is hardly discussed.

1. The report puts its main faith on conventional zoning—a very weak reed to lean upon. There is no reference, for instance, to public acquisition of open spaces.

2. There is only a slight reference to the use of transportation facilities to guide growth, even though these offer great promise. Furthermore, when transportation facilities are mentioned, the reference is to freeways which would damage existing residential areas and encourage further sprawl, rather than to rapid transit which would preserve existing communities and structure growth.

3. The report accepts the independence of planning in the incorporated municipalities, as provided by the Municipal Home Rule Act. This is unfortunately a reasonable position, but it is worth while asking whether we don't need some kind of a sub-regional planning agency, covering both counties or at least all of Montgomery County.

D. There is little evidence of serious research into the question of residential land use.

1. Most important, there has apparently been little or no analysis of the housing market. Or, if there has, the MNCPPC underestimates the desire of its constituents to know the facts on

which policy is based. Certainly an analysis of the demand for apartments in the years to come might dissipate much of the hostility to apartments, if it showed that future apartment dwellers would be more wealthy and older than in the past, and an asset instead of a liability in calculations of tax revenue versus cost of public services.

2. The lack of a research basis is especially serious when one considers the specific recommendations. For instance, why should there be 1177 apartments in the Four Corners planning area, and 357 in Burtonsville?

To conclude, we need a new philosophy of civic design in Montgomery County, and new tools to carry it out. The new philosophy is founded on the idea of planned high densities. The objective would be a highly integrated community, in which we could live much more efficiently than in today's communities, just as a modern kitchen, designed to minimize steps and motions, is a much more efficient instrument than an old fashioned kitchen. In this community, it will not be necessary for a person living in a large apartment house to go two miles for a pack of cigarettes, for small children to dodge heavy traffic on the way to school, or for a family to maintain a second car so father can get to the bus stop in the morning.

This philosophy calls for the use of governmental powers of land acquisition in creating the new high-density centers, for two reasons. First, only by the use of governmental powers can land be assembled in adequate quantities at the right places, and the totality of land uses be specified in all their necessary interrelated details. Second, high densities create high land values, and only by governmental assembly of the land for high density development can these values be acquired for the public rather than falling into the hands of private landowners.

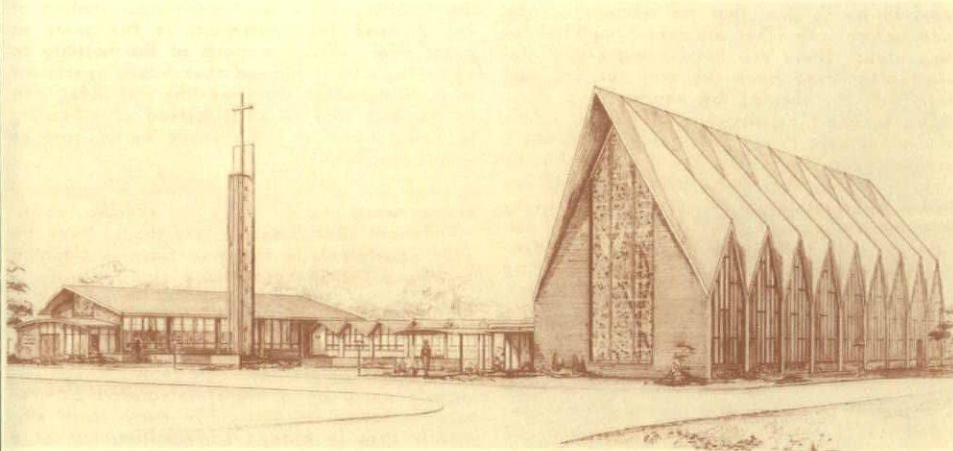
This may sound like a radical proposal, but we should recognize that there is ample precedent for it, both in the urban redevelopment powers of local governments (which are a losing, rather than a profit-making operation, but which are not different in principle from what is proposed), and in the increasing tendency to require developers to dedicate land for parks and school sites (which is an imperfect way of capturing a very small part of the density value of land).

In defense of the Residential Land Use document, it may be said that many of the above criticisms deal with matters beyond the projection of population distributions and densities, to broader questions of planning goals and methods. This is true, but where should the planning process start? Perhaps the MNCPPC should be devoting more of its attention to questions of community design, and tools for realizing its designs. Perhaps this is necessary before many intelligent decisions can be made as to the distribution and density of population.

Submitted by Henry M. Bain, Jr., to the Board of Governors of the Montgomery County Citizens Planning Association. Mr. Bain is a consultant in public administration, specializing in problems of metropolitan areas.

GAUDREAU AT NEXT MEETING

Paul Gaudreau AIA, past president of the Baltimore Chapter, will be the featured speaker at the next meeting of the Potomac Valley Chapter at Brook Farm Restaurant on Wednesday, December 7.



TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, North Bethesda, Maryland. Milton J. Prassas and Associates, Architects-Engineers.

Voters Support Urban Renewal Authority

All Maryland cities and counties may now consider and plan for urban renewal programs as a result of voter approval of a referendum in the recent election. Until then only Baltimore City had constitutional authority to participate in such Federally-assisted programs.

The effect of the ballot action was to amend the Constitution to permit condemnation authority of the cities and counties for other than purely public purposes since under urban renewal procedures public bodies "assemble" land and then resell it to private individuals for redevelopment.

The next hurdle will be enabling legislation at the next session of the General Assembly granting authority to municipalities and counties to undertake specific programs.

The electoral mandate should give various communities sufficient encouragement to proceed with basic planning in this area. Rockville, Maryland, is one such community which is organizing a citizens urban renewal committee to study blighted areas.

OMISSION

We would like to apologize to Mr. David H. Condon for the omission of his name from the 1960-61 Roster of our Chapter members. Mr. Condon has his office at 1300 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. in Washington. His office phone is HO-part 2-6461 and at home, Whitehall 2-8912. Mr. Condon's name was inadvertently omitted from the list of Un-assigned Members.

Mrs. Clifton B. White

The Potomac Valley Chapter was deeply saddened by the sudden and untimely death of Virginia White, wife of our fellow member, Cliff White.

While Virginia's activities were greatly limited, she was always anxious and willing to do her part in Chapter duties as was evidenced by her untiring efforts during the A.I.A. Convention in 1957.

The same loyalty was expressed in her work as an officer in The Inner Wheel of Silver Spring. She always said, "I'll be happy to help with anything I can do home."

Her sunny disposition and gay laughter will long be remembered.

CSI MEETING

The next meeting of the Construction Specifications Institute will take place at the National Housing Center on December 20 at 7:30 P.M. A special program is planned around the theme: "Associates Night."



APARTMENT DEVELOPMENT, Prince Georges County, Maryland. Clifton B. White, Architect.

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1. Preliminary Phase:

250 unit apartment project, Prince George's County Shopping Center near Laurel, Md.

2. Working Drawings:

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Residence, Kenwood, Md.

3. Supervision Phase:

Residence, Irvington, Va.
Remodeling, Flagship Restaurant, Washington
Community Paint & Hardware Warehouse, Bethesda, Md.

Potomac Valley Architect in South America

Mr. George A. Speer, A.I.A., one of our Chapter's new members, is at present on a special assignment for the A.I.A. as a housing consultant in Bogota, Colombia. Mr. Speer expects to be in Colombia on this work for approximately one month, after which he will be in Lima, Peru, as an advisor and consultant to the Peruvian government for about two months.

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