Growth in Cecil County and the Current Comprehensive Plan

Cecil County is expected to be one of Maryland’s fastest growing counties (as a percentage of current population) over the next 20 years, with a projected increase of possibly 60 percent from its present population of 100,000.

The current Comprehensive Plan for the county, adopted in 1990 for the ensuing 20-year period, recommended that most new residential and commercial development be concentrated in a designated growth corridor through the north center of the county along major thoroughfares U.S. Rt. 40 and I-95, which cross the county horizontally, around or through the existing towns of Perryville, North East, and Elkton. Agricultural areas north and south of the growth corridor were to be protected from large-scale development. One of the plan’s land use goals was to “Maintain agricultural uses by resisting encroachment of development into prime agricultural lands, and physically separating other land uses from agricultural activities.”

Unfortunately, a failure of previous county governments to provide for adequate water and sewer infrastructure along the designated growth corridor (between the towns) has allowed new residential development to emerge in rural and protected areas of the county which rely on onsite wells for water and septic systems for waste. In 2006, for example, one-third of approved lots were located outside of the designated growth area.* This growth in rural areas was also encouraged by the relatively high residential density (compared to similar areas in neighboring counties) allowed there by the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance. The allowed housing densities have only recently been lowered as part of the county’s TDR plan, enacted in 2006 (see below).

The county is studying the feasibility of a major water supply line along the I-95 and U.S. 40 corridor from an intake in the Susquehanna River. The projected influx of new people and, hopefully, businesses (estimates vary) from the BRAC expansion at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Harford County is a major factor in the renewed interest in the Cecil County growth corridor. The Comprehensive Plan recommended that developers in residentially zoned districts be encouraged to reserve portions of these districts for future development when public sewer and water become available. This development reserve is intended to make better use of publicly financed infrastructure by encouraging more concentrated development.

However, expansion of sewer capacity in the desired areas may be impeded by state-imposed limits on discharges into the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. County officials project a need to more than double the capacity of the sewage plant serving the heart of Cecil's growth corridor, which would far exceed the caps. Such limitations would provide further incentive for undesirable growth in the form of suburban sprawl onto converted farmland relying on septic systems, producing a potentially greater proportion of undesirable effluents than in the more compact areas. At present, the Bay’s five tributary rivers that surround Cecil’s extensive shoreline are overwhelmed by
insufficient sewage capacity that allows untreated waste to seep directly into the rivers during periods of heavy precipitation.

Requests by local officials for MDE to raise the effluent caps as a “credit” for other environmental initiatives have so far yielded little progress.

In 2006, after intense debate among citizens who felt the Comprehensive Plan was not being followed, farmers wishing to sell their land for commercial or residential development, farmers hoping to maintain contiguous agricultural areas, and developers wishing to build there, the county agreed to downzone rural areas, imposing a 1 house per 10 acre limit in the county’s Northern Agricultural Residential zone and 1 per 20 acres in the Southern zone. A system of TDRs (Transfer of Development Rights), whereby rural landowners could sell their development rights for use in the designated growth area, was simultaneously established to help compensate farmers for the new restrictions. The TDR Plan was strongly endorsed by the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy.

However, unless and until full-service water and sewage is provided to the designated growth area, residential growth is most likely to continue to expand (a) out from existing towns and villages, typically accomplished by annexing surrounding farmland or undeveloped woodland; (b) in rural protected areas; and (c) along the county’s extensive waterfront.

Still another handicap is the county’s failure to implement an APFO (Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance) which would inhibit growth in areas without essential capital facilities or the requisite funding to build. The APFO was envisioned as a necessary component for smart growth in the 1990 Comprehensive Plan. A draft APFO is now being considered by the County Commissioners, but a consensus on the details has not been achieved.

As the Comprehensive Plan is scheduled to be updated in 2010, a new committee to review and recommend changes to the 1990 plan is currently getting underway.


— By Mike Burns with some additional information from George Kaplan