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From the Baltimore Sun

Who's minding the Shore?

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A while ago, an anonymous wag ordered up a batch of bumper stickers printed with what has to go down as one of the most ignored sentiments in the recent history of adhesive humor: "Welcome to the Eastern Shore. Now go home!"



From Elkton to Crisfield and places in between, newcomers are settling on the Shore as though the state's portion of the Delmarva Peninsula had been kept under wraps for ages. So much new development is under way or planned that the region faces an extraordinary jump in population, from 425,000 to 585,000 in the next 25 years, according a story reported by Sun writers Rona Kobell and Chris Guy. As dramatic as a 38 percent general increase in the number of residents is by itself, it's more astonishing to learn that some towns are anticipating - even welcoming - growth that will more than double their size. Do they really know what they're getting into?

With little guidance from state planners and during nearly four years under a governor whose philosophy of growth management is pronounced "laissez faire," small towns encountering growth questions have had to wing it on their own. Too often, part-time town councils have fallen for the developers' compelling but specious argument that growth, usually through annexation of county land, balances budgets. In fact, growth often threatens budgets because providing municipal services to new neighborhoods costs more than the taxes collected. And what's the prescription for that ailment? Higher taxes.

Developers aren't the only ones who pressure local governments for more construction. As more residents crowd into an area, the demand for more amenities grows louder. Need proof? Drive through Easton, Cambridge and Salisbury. While the road is straight, you may think you're driving in circles because the scenery is almost the same.

In the near-absence of meaningful support from the state level, rural governments might have considered looking for help from the Maryland Municipal League, which lobbies the General Assembly on behalf of towns, or the Maryland Association of Counties, which represents the interests of counties. Don't count on it. The two organizations often are at odds with each other, particularly on matters that deal with land annexation and which base of taxpayers - the town or the county - will have to foot the bills for new schools and roads. The lack of cooperation between these two groups cries out for a regional approach to planning based on what is good for the Shore as a whole.

Historically, the Eastern Shore has been both proud and defensive of its physical separation from the rest of the state. A few times it has even debated whether it should secede from Maryland. People on the Shore have fought and won major development battles - against a Wal-Mart in Kent County and against a plan to convert Wye Island in Queen Anne's County into an exclusive village. If there was ever a time when it should show a little backbone, it is now.

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