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From the Baltimore Sun

Cecil County sees threat in plan to save bay

Sewage cap clashes with Smart Growth

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In a looming clash between Smart Growth and environmental protection, Cecil County officials say that a state plan to clean up the [Chesapeake Bay](#) could steer development away from the county's designated growth area and onto farmland, where it would worsen sprawl and pollute the estuary even more.

"It will devastate us," said Nelson K. Bolender, president of the county commissioners. "It's bad. It's very bad."

The state plan, unveiled this year, would cap sewage treatment plant discharges in a bid to reduce nutrients fouling the bay. State officials say they need to curb pollutants from sewage plants, farms and lawns to reach the water-quality goals that Maryland and other bay states agreed to in 2000.

"This is a huge challenge," said Robert M. Summers, director of water management for the [Maryland Department of the Environment](#). "To meet water-quality standards in the [Chesapeake Bay](#), pretty much all these sources need to be controlled to the maximum extent possible."

But in Cecil, the state's second-fastest-growing county, the sewage plant serving the designated growth corridor along U.S. 40 and Interstate 95 is likely to hit its state-proposed limit within the next few years, county officials say. Further development in that part of the county then would have to rely on septic systems, and it would have to spread out, probably into areas that were intended to remain rural.

With the county's population projected to increase by about 50 percent over the next 20 years, from 97,250 last year to 147,350 in 2025, county officials say that they need to more than double the capacity of the sewage plant serving the heart of Cecil's growth corridor. The plant, which empties into the North East River, would also handle wastewater from businesses and industries that local officials expect to locate there.

The North East River plant, designed to handle 2 million gallons of sewage a day, treats about half that much now, said Matheu J. Carter, the county's capital facilities administrator. But 60 percent of the remaining capacity is committed for development already approved by the county, leaving little for future growth.

"The irony of these nutrient caps is, the one place we won't be able to develop is our designated growth area," Carter said.

Without relief from the state limit, Carter said, "we're concerned we may soon be in a situation where [we're] closed for business." County officials would have to deny sewer hookups to businesses and developers seeking to build in the growth corridor.

The North East River sewage plant is among 66 statewide that will receive state "flush tax" funds to upgrade so that they can remove more nitrogen and phosphorus. The two chemical nutrients, commonly found in fertilizers, are blamed for runaway algae growth, which clouds the bay and deprives it of fish-sustaining oxygen. Vast swaths of the Chesapeake suffer from low oxygen in summer.

The Cecil plant's upgrade, scheduled to occur by 2010, could enable it to handle waste from more homes and businesses - but not enough to meet the projected population growth, county officials say. The state cap on the plant's nitrogen discharge would allow it to expand enough to treat about 2.7 million gallons daily, Carter estimated.

Development is unlikely to be stopped by lack of sewage treatment capacity and will spread into rural areas intended to be used for farming, officials say.

"The result will be sprawl - houses built on conventional septic systems that will produce more nutrients [in] the bay, not less," Carter said.

Summers acknowledged that home septic systems release more nutrients per capita than sewage plants. But he said that allowing Cecil to release more nutrients from its North East River plant would undermine a statewide effort to reduce nutrients from every sewage facility that discharges into the bay or its tributaries.

Through monitoring and computer modeling, the state is determining the maximum amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment that each bay tributary can take and still have water clean enough for fish and aquatic plants. The state hopes to obtain one-third of the nutrient reductions from sewage plants and two-thirds from controls on runoff from farms and developed land.

"The situation with the bay is, it's already exceeding its carrying capacity for nutrients," Summers said. "We need to reduce nutrients from all sources. So there's not a lot of wiggle room."

But development pressure is increasing in this largely rural county, and officials expect it to accelerate over the next several years as military base realignment brings an estimated 9,000 new civilian and military jobs to Aberdeen Proving Ground in neighboring Harford County. Defense contractors and support industries relocating near the base could bring more. Some of those new workers are expected to seek housing in Cecil.

"In the region, we're expecting that Cecil County would be accepting some of that growth," said Susan Stroud of the Home Builders Association of Maryland. She said builders and others have "grave concerns" about Cecil being able to house base workers if the county's growth is limited by sewage caps.

Eric S. Sennstrom, Cecil's planning and zoning director, said the county has been attempting to manage its development in adherence with the state's nearly decade-old Smart Growth law. That law aims to use state funding to concentrate development around existing communities, where it could be served by public water and sewage treatment. Smart Growth has long been considered an essential element in restoring the bay, since it aims to reduce loss of forests and open land.

To handle the development expected in Cecil's growth corridor in the next several years, Sennstrom said,

county officials project that they'll need to expand sewage treatment capacity for that area to 5 million gallons daily.

If sewage treatment limits hinder development in the growth area, Sennstrom added, "that could open the rural areas to being gobbled up by low-density, individual well and septic subdivisions, which would increase pressure on providing services, roads and bridges, more far-flung schools, more demand for parks in remote areas. It could be a land-use nightmare if that scenario plays out."

County officials have been wrestling for years with how to save Cecil's farming heritage from being lost to development without depriving farmers of property rights. After much debate, the county commissioners narrowly voted last summer to downzone vast rural areas, but set up a program under which landowners could sell their development rights for use in the designated growth area. The looming restriction on rural development, which takes effect Jan. 1, has prompted a flurry of proposals for new housing subdivisions, officials say.

To give Cecil more room to grow in its development corridor, Carter, the county's capital facilities chief, said he has asked the state to give it credit for reducing bay pollution by downzoning its rural areas, cutting the number of houses that could be built there by about 24,000.

"We're taking a very serious look at it," said the MDE's Summers. Maryland officials are considering a statewide plan that would ease the pinch of the nutrient caps by letting treatment facilities trade discharge rights.

A sewage plant wanting to expand beyond its allowed limit might do so by "retiring" unused treatment capacity from another facility, Summers said. Or it could pay for farm pollution controls or wetlands creation that would soak up enough nutrients to offset the increased discharge from the sewage plant.

Virginia and Pennsylvania have set up similar trading plans. Summers said Maryland officials are in the early stages of discussion.

Environmentalists, who have long advocated bay cleanup and Smart Growth, say they hope something can be worked out to allow Cecil room to grow without harming the Chesapeake.

Kim Coble, Maryland director for the [Chesapeake Bay](#) Foundation, said Cecil's problems demonstrate the need to take a broader, regional approach to growth, "to make sure we're growing in the right areas ... and not growing in areas that are harmful."

But George Maurer, a planner with the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, which supports protecting farms from development, suggested that Cecil officials might need to rethink their growth plans.

"They need to retool their land use plan because it's unrealistic," he said. "This is the future that we're going to have to deal with in many parts of the state. We're going to be hitting these kinds of limits. And so it's going to require some really novel approaches and agreements."

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