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## Hurdles to Montgomery 'smart growth' option

*Some say proposal fails to go far enough, and others consider it unrealistic*

By Miranda S. Spivack

*This is why my proposed State Overlay Zone for land within walking distance of Metro-rail stations is ABSOLUTELY necessary!*

As **Montgomery County's population nears 1 million** and the recession shows few signs of abating, county officials are casting about for ways to keep the treasury strong. Almost everyone endorses two big fixes: Attract more high-paying jobs, and make it easier for residents to live near their work.

The challenge is where to put everyone.

Planning Board Chairman **Royce Hanson**, a nationally known thinker about growth and planning and the **father of the county's 93,000-acre agricultural reserve**, says he can meet the challenge even though Montgomery is almost out of vacant land for development.

Much of what is available for development is lucrative shopping centers that could be converted into small villages as long as there are incentives to idle the properties while construction takes place, Hanson said.

He proposes changing the county's Annual Growth Policy, which is updated every two years, to make development easier in areas where growth policy now discourages it because of congestion. His plan, under debate by the County Council, would **reward developers who build near transit and create walkable, bikeable communities by giving them discounts and allowing them to avoid the usual requirements to fix congested roads nearby** or make improvements so their developments don't add to traffic.

If the [proposal](#) is adopted by the County Council, Montgomery would be in the vanguard of communities in the Washington area to try to apply urban solutions to suburban problems.

"Knowing that the population and tastes are changing in terms of what people want in living style, we think it makes a lot of sense to move from a system that has been historically based on what you can't do, based on capacity of mainly roads, to a system that focuses on what you ought to do and where you ought to do it," Hanson said one recent day as he prepared for another marathon session with the County Council committee reviewing the Annual Growth Policy.

The council must make any changes by Nov. 15, or the existing policy will remain in effect.

To many, such "smart growth" makes sense. And some smart growth advocates say Hanson's plans don't go far enough.

"They are tinkering," said **Ben Ross**, who heads the **Action Committee for Transit**, an advocacy group.

But some residents and political leaders say the proposal is unrealistic in a county where most Metro stations are more than a mile apart, residents rely on their cars for commuting and doing errands even if they would prefer not to, and government is short of funds to upgrade or expand the transit system.

"For the foreseeable future, most people in Montgomery County will continue to drive," said County Council President **Phil Andrews** (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville). "I believe it is a critical measure of the quality of life, and it is a crucial one for many of our residents."

*Government's job is big-picture long-term! Andrew's comment is malpractice — we can do much better! Read **Montgomery Wants to Know: Will That Road Make You Sick?** By Michael Laris, Washington Post Staff Writer, 28Sep09 — section \_\_\_ on [Woodmont Triangle page of my website](#).*

Council Vice President **Roger Berliner** (D-Potomac-Bethesda) said constituents "feel threatened by this county's embrace of smart growth and new urbanism . . . fed by a belief that a lifestyle of a suburban community is not respected and should not be respected." He said Hanson should point to success stories such as Bethesda and Silver Spring to make clear what he is proposing and to reassure critics that the thousands of single-family houses that dot Montgomery won't be directly affected by the plan.

*Read: **At NW Mall, So Many Spaces, So Little Need D.C. Losing Millions On Empty Garage** — section 42 on [Woodmont Triangle page of my website](#).*

### **A last chance**

It is Hanson's last chance to have a major effect on the county's growth plans. He returned in 2006 after revelations about lax enforcement of building rules in Clarksburg led to a clamor for a new leader. He had headed the agency from 1972 to 1981.

Now, as he winds down his four-year term with no plans to seek another one, he said he hopes to promote sustainable, environmentally sensitive communities. Whether his legacy can last is an open question: Even if the council agrees to do what he proposes, it could be tweaked or undone once he's out of office.

"We really have an opportunity to build the kind of communities that serve both the creative class and the ordinary working people in the county, and to create the kind of communities that are walkable, bikeable and transit-oriented, and eventually can actually have the effect of reducing congestion," he said.

Hanson said development would be proposed for a "few strategically selected areas, where new development seems to be reasonable and should be urban in character," such as White Flint and an area west of Interstate 270, targeted for a "science city" modeled after Palo Alto, Calif., or Cambridge, Mass. Quality of life could be measured by something other than how long it takes to drive somewhere, his top aide, Rollin Stanley, recently told the council. "We should give people other options."

Hanson said his proposed changes would ease the way for such developments.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has hired a former planning agency official to study the road congestion proposal, but the results won't be ready until next year, possibly not until after the November elections. Leggett said he does not like the Planning Board's proposal.

"The proposed 2009 Growth Policy includes assumptions and directions that I believe could significantly impair the quality of life in Montgomery County," he wrote the council recently.

**Paula Bienenfeld**, a community activist who lives near the proposed development site in White Flint, is among those worried.

"I would think at this point they would **focus on getting more public transit**," she said.

The Planning Board has tried to make improving transit an ironclad guarantee for much new development. In July, when the board approved a proposed science city spearheaded by Johns Hopkins University, members were adamant that the development could not be built unless the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway bus or rail system is funded and built. Funding transit, however, is up to federal, state and local lawmakers who are struggling with large budget shortfalls, so the Planning Board can advocate it but can't create it.

### 'In the right direction'

Council member **Michael Knapp** (D-Upcounty), who heads the committee reviewing the growth policy, said **Hanson is on the right track**.

"What they are trying to achieve is moving in the right direction. It is a very challenging concept to present. I am not sure that people who already live in the county have come to the reality that the Planning Board has come to, saying, **'Yes, we are an urban county.'**"

Residents assume that the county is going to quickly "go from a sleepy suburban bedroom community to Manhattan," Knapp added. But that, he said, is an overreaction. "We won't be Manhattan," he said.

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*How about fixing the broken land-use regulatory system to enable more people to function without getting into a car? {see section 28a on the Woodmont Triangle web page.}*