

# OUTLOOK Commentary | B 08

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## Where Has All the Vision Gone in Maryland?

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Pity the poor Maryland state or local elected officials facing reelection in 2010. **Their response to the fiscal crisis has been reactive and uninspired**, and voters are getting angrier by the day.

Montgomery County voters recently passed the Ficker amendment, a tax cap measure, as their first salvo.

No one in office today has ever seen anything like the current crisis. The economy is collapsing, tax revenue is in free fall, services must be slashed, job losses are accelerating, and home foreclosures are skyrocketing, and yet our state and local elected officials act as if they've been there and done that. Based on their response so far, we are in a run-of-the-mill recession with recovery just around the corner. So they do what they've always done: Raise taxes here, cut around the edges there, raid reserves everywhere, repeat every few months and pray that they get through their next election. **No thought is given to rethinking**, just going through the familiar drills.

*State and local government needs re-engineering every bit as much as the finance industry does and the automotive industry does ...*

*Gov't's job is big-picture long-term NOT micro-minutia. They spend far too much money to accomplish far too little. A consequence of this kind of governance is to hurt the private sector unjustifiably and as a result to shoot themselves in the foot, since all government money comes from the private sector.*

Their one concession to how different these times are is to climb aboard the federal bailout bandwagon and cry "Feds to the rescue, Feds to the rescue!" **Difficult decisions don't have to be made in Annapolis** because the federal stimulus will plug all the holes in the budget that gambling revenue won't. River Road is washed away by a broken water main, and a Montgomery County Council member blames the federal government because the feds haven't given the county money for WSSC infrastructure maintenance. Far too much faith is being placed in the **Obama stimulus package** as the solution to every problem, rather than the **stopgap measure** that it is.

The federal stimulus does give our state and local elected officials more time to adjust to the economic changes, but after the stimulus is gone a very slowly recovering economy will still be

there. **Fundamental changes must be made at the state and local level** to respond to the worst economy since the Great Depression, and the public must be involved in the decisions that are made. First, though, the public has to be informed, honestly and courageously.

Trust and confidence in government need to be restored, and it has to start with an honest accounting about the challenges we face along with a vision of where we want to go. It's time to be truthful to the public and acknowledge that government's capabilities must be reshaped for some time to come. **Can state and local elected officials get back to basics by adopting zero-based budgeting and conducting a healthy review of government's core missions and competencies?** Can they decide a program is no longer affordable and then cut it entirely out of the budget? Can they get ahead of the revenue forecasts and stop changing budgets every few months? Can they redesign services to face a new economic reality?

For their reelection's sake, they better hope they can, because if they can't, the voters will replace them with others who will.

-- Doug Duncan

*Rockville*

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*For example — the entire MPDU / Affordable Housing bureaucracy is based upon no rational economic theory. You cannot ignore the basic law of supply and demand any more than you can violate the law of gravity. We have a fundamental imbalance between jobs and housing.*

*Building homes for every segment of the employed market should be a profit-making business. Bad government is the reason it isn't. Wal-Mart is the biggest retailer in the world, and they are the most profitable, too. Their customer needs affordable housing.*

*Another key example is over-regulation in the name of the environment. Unless government gets the big things right, the small stuff is irrelevant, yet the forest conservation manual goes to micro-detail and at absurd unjustifiable cost.*

*We have a profound disharmony between land-use and transportation. Rail is a regional system, not local. Rail serves pedestrians not cars. Government's job is to facilitate maximizing the sources and destinations of pedestrians within walking distance of rail stations. Height limits and FAR limits are arbitrary and counter to the public interest. Unless we enable people to function as pedestrians they have no choice but to use cars. Energy waste, pollution (air and water -- 25% of nitrogen in Chesapeake Bay is from auto exhaust), public health (obesity is #1 US problem -- walking more is single simplest antidote) are the key issues — not whether a building should be 143 feet tall or 174 feet or 200 feet or any number. Design and economic feasibility are what matters. Metro-rail stations are an incredibly scarce resource. We cannot waste them.*

***Let's correct regulating land-use within walking distance of rail stations and re-engineer the TDR program (rational, elegant and functional) and eliminate unconsonable waste!***