

Economy killing local strip malls

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The Montgomery County Council sanctioned major revisions to its zoning codes at Tuesday's meeting in hopes to transform the deserted, dying strip malls into more vibrant communities. In 2009, the county fell victim to a similar plight seen across the District and Virginia area: a wasteland of shopping centers with empty parking lots and boarded-up windows.

Along Route 355, which runs the length of the county and into Frederick County, is no stranger to the problem. The White Flint Shopping Center in North Bethesda used to boast a bustling shopping crowd, but their economic downturn began after the holidays in 2008 and never picked up. Three businesses in just the last two months have closed at the neighboring shopping center.

The large Anthropologie women's clothing store stands empty at Rockville Pike and Nicholson Lane with no renters vying for the space. Next door, a car dealership stands vacant. Some shop owners are pleased with the lack of competition they now face, others realize the lack of cars in the parking lots mean an overall lack of money coming in. Some blame the online shopping as the ultimate downfall of the strip mall.

The remedy, County Council President Nancy Floreen believes, is a White Flint Sector Plan to promote better development and easier access to Metrorail.

The plan focuses on development that combines residential, retail and office space, that will also "change the look and feel of that part of the county," according to Floreen. The combined effort is considered a "mixed-use" approach which would reduce parking, allow taller buildings and in some cases, allow for less than what is currently being required in green space. White Flint's tallest building is 289 feet and under the new zoning system builders could raise that to 300 feet. The approach is being used in many areas across the east coast in hopes to bring virtual shoppers back into physical stores.

The county's goal is to set up a new zoning system that could be used to create urban suburbs, especially in places like White Flint that are considered "in serious need" of revitalization. County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett supported the new zoning system at the meeting, which enables the codes to become law without his signature.

"We are trying to make the code easier to follow," said council member George Leventhal.

Councilmember Marc Elrich, one of the few who opposed the new zoning system said he lacked the votes to buy him more time before it passed. Elrich hoped he could get stricter standards passed which would require developers to pay more for extra density to help preserve open space in the county, citing the new green space requirements.