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Montgomery, Md., council takes step toward approving changes to zoning code

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The [Montgomery County Council](#) endorsed major revisions to its zoning code Tuesday, the first stage of a broader debate over how to transform strip malls and commercial buildings into more walkable, livable settings.

The council took a series of straw votes on the details of a proposed "commercial-residential" zone that would encourage mixed-use projects while also reducing parking, allowing taller buildings and, in some instances, limiting required green space.

The goal is to set up a new zoning system that could be used to create urban suburbs, especially in places such as the White Flint area along Rockville Pike, where developers say they need clarity about what will be required. Many hope to be ready in a few years to reshape the jumble of car dealerships, strip centers and White Flint Mall into a more pleasant environment where residents can live, work, shop and find entertainment.

The proposed zone, which is also supposed to be easier for the general public to understand, would allow buildings as tall as 300 feet; currently, the tallest building near White Flint is about 289 feet. The tallest building in downtown Bethesda, widely viewed as Montgomery's most successful urbanized suburb, is about 200 feet, leading some critics to say that the proposal will lead to the Rosslynization of Montgomery.

Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson (D) said he thought the zoning plans, which the council is expected to approve next week, would encourage developers to contribute to the creation of public spaces and provide urban amenities in exchange for more density.

"We are going to produce a really great environment," he said. The new zone also gives Hanson, soon to retire, a final chance to put his imprint on the broader rezoning effort, which will begin after his term expires in June.

But the proposal has its skeptics. Despite months of deliberation in the council's planning committee, the [council's staff is recommending against the new zone](#), saying that such major changes should wait for the [more comprehensive, all-inclusive zoning code rewrite](#) that could begin in the next several months.

Hanson acknowledged that the new zone would provide the groundwork for the broader zoning code rewrite, but it may not be the template for all of Montgomery. Other

communities that are ripe for redevelopment would have ample opportunity to outline what they want, he said.

A spokesman for County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) said that the proposal addressed many of the administration's concerns but that it should be "applied with care to avoid big disparities" between communities.

Pat Baptiste, a former Planning Board member who helped spearhead opposition to the proposal, said she remained perplexed that the board and the council were pushing ahead with the new zone, since the comprehensive rewrite is soon to come.

She and other critics worried that, despite Hanson's assurances, public comment could be limited, and that developers would be able to build more densely without having to give much in return. Many of the proposed amenities would be encouraged but not required.

"It is structured so that there is no interest in what the local community wants," she said.

Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), a former member of the Planning Board, said she thought the proposal had done a lot to improve the prospects for transit-oriented redevelopment. "We've embraced a new approach, and we have also protected the existing community," she said.

Did the council make big strides in streamlining local zoning and making it easier to understand, two of its stated goals?

"I would just comment that we want to simplify the code, except when we don't," quipped council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) during the debate.