

Montgomery County Council finalizes development scheme

By Victor Zapana, Published: October 4

A divided and weary Montgomery County Council on Tuesday finalized an innovative but controversial proposal to spur the county's development.

By endorsing a set of regulations for mixed-use development, the council ended — at least officially — a debate that has lasted for more than a year. Developers have been at odds with civic associations and some municipalities over how to urbanize parts of traditionally suburban Montgomery.

But after a ceremonial vote by the council next week, the county planning staff will move forward with implementing the new regulations on commercial land countywide.

Hashing out the plan was a tough task for council members, who struggled to adapt a single set of rules to areas as varied as Clarksburg, which is desperate for development, and Germantown, which is open to tougher regulations.

With the finalized proposal, the council struck a balance between the interests of the civic associations, whose members have worn green T-shirts with the slogan "Don't Urbanize MoCo," and the developers, who have said they need the flexibility to build during the current economic downturn.

The proposal increases public input in commercial development and creates flexible incentives to encourage developers to come to Montgomery. Although critics have expressed fears of high-rise complexes that would overshadow traditional single-family neighborhoods, council members added restrictions to alleviate some of the concerns.

The greatest source of controversy and confusion was a list of incentives for creating public amenities such as libraries and child-care centers. In particular, council members debated whether they were doing enough to encourage the construction of affordable housing.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and others have said that without enough restrictions, developers would be unlikely to build more than is legally required.

But some council members, such as Craig Rice (D-Upcounty), said to spur affordable housing, the county should tweak housing laws, not the regulations before the council on Tuesday. Rice said he wants the council to conduct a separate meeting to discuss possible changes to those laws.

Council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), who supported looser restrictions, said that developers need flexibility. Ultimately, the majority of the council agreed.

Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier said in the meeting that planning officials will help encourage development that is “in the best public interest.”

Council members said in the meeting that they think the planning staff will make good decisions on behalf of the county. That assumption worries civic activists such as Kensington View Civic Association member Virginia Sheard, who said she does not trust government to do the right thing.

“We have reasons why we don’t have faith,” she said of her neighbors. “We have a storage facility within 50 feet from us.”

Council member Nancy Navarro (D-Eastern County) successfully pushed through an amendment — among the few unanimously approved — to encourage the creation of teen support centers. She proposed the amendment, she said, in light of a bill that would institute a nighttime curfew for those younger than 18.

Judy Higgins, land use and zoning chair for the Kensington View group, said the outcome was “disgusting.”

“It was clear that a majority of the council members did not fully understand what was before them,” she said