

Comments on Anne Arundel County Draft GDP 2008

From
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The quality of life we expect in Anne Arundel County relates directly to the health of our environment. CEPA believes strongly that clean water is its lifeblood. Our determination to preserve clean water for people and their encompassing ecosystems will determine just what that quality of life will be. So it was with keen interest that CEPA looked at the General Development Plan for maintaining fresh water supply, treating wastewater and controlling stormwater run-off. Each of these environmental issues is tied to one overwhelming dependent variable, namely growth. It controls the water extracted from the ground, the nutrients in wastewater, and the impervious surfaces for run-off. Each of these issues comes with a large expense that must be borne by someone, ultimately the citizens, who are taxpayers. As the draft GDP implies, Anne Arundel County is living well beyond its means.

So, with great expectation we thought Chapter 3 of the GDP, entitled “Balanced Growth and Sustainability” would provide some insight into these issues. However, we were disappointed. It brings to the fore the fact that we will face unpalatable choices that inevitably will reduce the quality of life in the county. However, there is little discussion of what constitutes a sustainable future. The chapter focuses mainly on a discussion of social and economic issues associated with growth.

Current revenue streams for the County are heavily dependent on growth as a continuing source of funds [the current fiscal crisis shows the vulnerability of this revenue]; yet development capacity is within sight of its limits. From the GDP, “if growth rates were to rise again, the County may not be able to accommodate much new growth beyond the 2030 timeframe due to limits on infrastructure capacity as well as development holding capacity.” Two decades is too short a timeframe to solve this problem. In assessing the fiscal impact it says, “under the County’s current revenue structure, new growth in population and employment generates net surpluses to the County. In other words, the net revenues generated by new growth outweigh the costs that the County incurs in providing public services to serve it.” With a little thought it becomes clear that this approach is not sustainable. Using operating revenue to fund capital projects means that some time in the future, operating revenue will not be able to pay for maintenance of the infrastructure. In fact this already may be occurring; “the conclusion reached is that under the current revenue structure and assuming current levels of service, the County is in a sense trading water, with annual revenues insufficient to cover the estimated costs of providing public facilities and infrastructure on a consistent yearly basis.” The shortfalls projected are staggering. One can only conclude that the GDP plan still expects to pay for growth with growth! Or perhaps reduce costs by reducing services and infrastructure costs (namely a reduction in quality of life).

Chapter 11 of the plan addresses the sources of revenue to cover the expenses of growth. However, the discussion within is not transparent about the County's ability to pay for the costs projected. In fact, it is not clear that even if all the sources cited were implemented that the costs would be covered. In this chapter for the first time the citizens are asked to consider a reduction in the quality of life. For example, if schools were asked to operate at 120% of capacity, clearly the revenue needed would be less. It certainly would be good for the environment with less impervious surface to contribute to run-off. But what would be the cost impact such a seemingly simple decision would have on the revenue streams? High-income earners would move out of the county, high tech jobs requiring education would move, and other sources of income that could provide sustainability would decrease.

Another example that illustrates the choices we face is the establishment of stormwater utilities to pay for run-off in developed areas. As a utility, they would be funded by the people who use it. These utilities work well in communities with common environmental goals and the ability to pay. Unfortunately, there are broad areas of Anne Arundel that need stormwater management yet have the least ability to pay for it. This is not idle speculation, Anne Arundel currently has communities needing sewer service now but cannot afford to pay for the service.

Within these Chapters there exists little guidance on how to develop a sustainable environment and/or economy for the County.

The current draft General Development Plan for Anne Arundel County does not give us hope for a sustainable future. It raises more questions about serious problems than it offers solutions for those problems. A plan should outline a way ahead, yet the draft GDP is a hortatory document hoping to accomplish good things with generalized goals.

CEPA believes that an effective GDP should:

- Develop a sustainable way of life in the County
 - Review the small area plans for applicability to the current plan
- Protect our environment above all, without clean water and air there is no quality of life
 - Enforce no net loss of tree cover with specific limits within watersheds
 - Enforce no encroachment on wetlands period
 - Enforce a specific limit on impervious surfaces, especially in impaired watersheds; it should include public infrastructure as well as private development
- State clearly the impact and the limits of growth within the county
- Recommend zoning strategies to be enacted in law that achieve objectives
 - Implement smart growth, overlay districts, resource conservation districts
- Set specific measurable goals with concrete timetables
- Derive realistic/specific cost estimates and sources of funds
- Identify county departments responsible for managing and enforcing the plan
- Issue periodic, meaningful status reports to the public

- Provide for ongoing citizen oversight and participation

CEPA believes that the County Council and the County Executive must exercise the leadership to explain honestly the critical choices the citizens of the county face.

Approved by the Board of Trustees on February 24, 2009

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Albert J. Tucker". The signature is written in black ink and features a prominent loop at the end of the word "Tucker".

Albert J. Tucker, Ph.D.

President of the Board of Trustees