

Opinion | Growth oversight committee to meet in Howard County



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In Howard County, the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance review committee has convened. APFO regulations guide residential development timing with a goal of balancing growth with the County's ability to provide "adequate" public services. The last review was completed in 2016, after which, County Council legislation updated the ordinance. That revision added the requirement for future APFO reviews to follow new County general growth plan updates, which was recently completed.

Currently, APFO measures data, including traffic, planned new units, and school capacity, then sets growth management limits that could delay some new home construction. Building projects first go through a traffic analysis, with possible mitigation planning. Then, for projects to proceed, there have to be units available, up to a cap, as legislation sets an annual maximum number of homes to be built. Currently, developments are not held up by this part of APFO, as the limits are fairly high.

The next test starts with school capacity data. I was on the 2016 APFO task force, where there was contentious debate as to what thresholds should be chosen to define what degree of Howard County Public School System enrollment overcapacity would trigger development pauses near overcrowded schools. Currently, either Elementary at 5%, Middle at 10% and/or High School at 15% over 100% capacities postpone regional development until the next year's updates. If a project has waited 4 years, it proceeds regardless of enrollment numbers.

Shorter wait times are desired by those wanting to speed up home supply provision. Those anxious to give the school system and other public services a chance to expand to accommodate new residents, want longer waits. It will be important to consider the fact that the county's current development process takes about three years before new projects begin. This is anticipated and known, and much of that time runs concurrently with APFO pauses. Analyzing the appropriate addition to that inherent wait, is key.

These details and others will be reviewed, keeping in mind how to balance goals of public services not being overwhelmed, while trying to accommodate other goals, such as getting more affordable housing supply. Other topics will include considering new measurements in APFO, changing wait times, or thresholds, and how APFO should apply to possible up-coming new zoning categories, such as Accessory Dwelling Units. ADUs are homes that are built on existing home parcels. HoCo By Design suggestions include easing restrictions on ADUs to create more small rental properties. ADUs could provide a good new market type of rental unit, and income for homeowners, but should be allowed conditionally, taking into consideration areas that would face storm water, or parking/traffic flow problems.

Some jurisdictions include health services in APFO tests for pausing home building. Howard County does not. It is a difficult measurement to apply to implement waiting periods. Many have experienced significant ER wait times at the Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center. With one hospital in the County, there is grave concern about how to manage a growing population's health service needs. Considering new measurements, adjusting current ones, and defining how APFO affects growth plans will be topics of interest for the new APFO committee. I was appointed to the committee again, and will be reporting on the process going forward.

Lynda Eisenberg, Director of the Department of Planning and Zoning publicly stated that the new APFO group "will recommend updates to our growth management policies that will impact the community and public infrastructure for years to come." The committee is tasked with taking HoCo By Design into consideration, but also balancing the growth goals with their primary responsibility of assuring public infrastructure is not overwhelmed. That is no easy task. Likely, most committee members will share commendable goals, but debate how to properly and effectively implement them. The recommendations will be sent to the County Executive and County Council, and will likely be followed by legislation, which will include a public hearing.