

The Capital

South County

Development plan worries south county leaders

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

As County Executive John R. Leopold's administration faces the daunting task of drafting a new 10-year blueprint for growth, south county residents have a bumper sticker for him: "Keep South County Rural."

County Executive John R. Leopold and leaders on the County Council have said they stand by that goal to keep development in check in still-bucolic south county.

But some involved in the planning process the last time around wonder if the public will be as involved this time.

Leaders hint they won't be repeating the Small Area Planning method that many considered protracted and cumbersome.

Ten years after the 1997 GDP was passed, triggering the Small Area process that divided the county into 16 pieces with a committee of citizens from each area developing specific growth guidelines for their community, the job still is not done.

Much less put into practice, according to council Chairman Ron Dillon Jr., R-Pasadena. "I know a lot of people are disappointed in the process, how long it took. Much of it has not been implemented."

He and District 7 councilman Ed Reilly, R-Crofton, both said it is up to the county executive and planning and zoning department to shape the process.

"But maybe we will have only eight areas, approach the process more regionally, this time," Mr. Dillon suggested.

Mr. Reilly noted the SAP's still are not complete from the last round.

"They are preparing the final Annapolis Neck plan. Then it can be forwarded ... to the council."

He said clearly his priority is to keep rampant development out of south county. "I anticipate no upzoning and will fight to keep south county rural."

He said many people thought the SAP's "too unwieldy, too long, too drawn out."

And to feisty, especially in south county.

The Deale-Shady Side and Edgewater-Mayo SAPs were marked by heated political maneuvering as the plans came up for approval before the County Council. Down in Deale the battle over a proposed Safeway was not settled until a last minute compromise

carved out by the late John Klocko, who represented District 7.

A similar last minute ploy had to be ironed out for the Edgewater plan to get approved.

The South County SAP passed without much haranguing. But a primary issue, the practice of family conveyances allowing landowners to build more homes than zoning allowed, was not settled until two years later.

Since then, some of those who served on the various committees have wondered if their effort was worth it.

Part of the disappointment in the process was the expectation by scores of citizens who participated in committees that the plans would carry the weight of law, only to find out their work was a mere suggestion of how development should proceed.

Peter Perry, who led land-use deliberations for the South County SAP committee, said the General Development Plan needs more teeth in it.

"To spend three years of your life for "suggestions" is a waste of time. If you don't have teeth in it they will still do what they want."

He said he understands it is a lot of work for the county planning and zoning staff, "But that is what we pay them for."

Ron Wolfe, who chaired the Deale-Shady Side SAP committee, said he has been disappointed.

"In our area we thought we wanted to keep south county rural. But now we are really under attack by developers, trying to build what we expressly said we did not want," he said. "We have to fight to keep them from building in the swamps."

"We put in hundreds, collectively thousands of hours, totally volunteer into the process," he added. "And now we wonder what we got out of it."

He realizes the process is expensive but it is a worthwhile investment because the county's half-million people only have seven representatives on the county and need an opportunity to get involved. "The process gave people the feeling they had closer ties to their government."

The General Development plan process won't get going in earnest until Mr. Leopold names a director for the Department of Planning and Zoning, which should happen in the coming weeks.

"I'm looking to spring to establish the framework for public participation," Mr. Leopold said.

Then he looks to four primary goals in the process:

Revitalizing older communities.

Keeping south county rural.

Centering growth around transit, like the MARC train in Odenton.

Ensuring development does not outpace infrastructure like schools, roads, water and sewer.

"One way to keep south county rural is to continue the priority of agricultural preservation," Mr. Leopold added, by using state and local programs to set aside farm and forested lands.

He will get a chance to discuss those matters first hand at a meeting next month with community leaders in south county.

"It is important to us to keep development in check below Route 214," said Don Avery, president of South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development. "It also is important we find a way within the GDP for people to be involved."

It seems the administration intends to do just that, but in what form remains to be seen.

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