

Fixing Montgomery's Mess

THE PARALLEL moves by Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) and members of the County Council to impose a temporary freeze on new home construction are a sensible response to a recent scandal in the upcounty town of Clarksburg over building permit violations. The freeze, pending a review of building projects in the pipeline, may seem draconian, and it will certainly inconvenience some home buyers and developers. But if it affords county officials some answers to what went wrong in Clarksburg and how to fix an evidently faulty oversight and enforcement system, the freeze makes sense as a step toward restoring trust in the integrity of the county's procedures for site plans and permit issuance.

It should not be mistaken, however, for a response to growth in the county. It's worth bearing in mind that over the past 15 years, residential growth in Montgomery County has been relatively slow, certainly compared to that of other large jurisdictions in the area. Since 1990 the county's population has expanded barely more than 1.5 percent a year. By contrast, employment growth in the county has been dramatic — 85,000 new jobs have been created since 1995 — which has contributed to gummed-up roads and a mounting sense of frustration. But job growth, a reflection of economic vitality, is a separate issue. The question arising from Clarksburg is how to address a crisis in confidence in county government.

At the moment, the county's Office of Legis-

lative Oversight as well as its inspector general's office are conducting separate reviews. The Office of Legislative Oversight is to examine systemic shortcomings, and the IG will parse the specifics of how hundreds of homes in Clarksburg were built too tall or too close to the street, in violation of approved limits. The results of the county reviews should be carefully scrutinized, not least for an understanding of why officials for months ignored the concerns of Clarksburg residents who repeatedly raised questions about construction violations. With a population of 5,000, which is expected to grow to about 40,000 in the coming years, Clarksburg is rightly in the spotlight. But it's not only Clarksburg: If the county cannot oversee development there, it will raise questions about every other community, countywide, where new neighborhoods are to be built.

In the course of the reviews, a number of questions are worth examining: Are building inspectors overwhelmed, and, if so, why? The county can easily hire more of them at no cost to taxpayers; their salaries are paid by fees assessed to developers. Do officials allow a culture of tolerance in the planning process, either in the Department of Permitting Services or in the Department of Parks and Planning? Are some developers taking advantage of lapses in the system to skirt approved limits on developing their properties? By providing serious, substantive answers to those and other questions, the county can show it is taking this systemic breakdown seriously, and start to fix it.