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Montgomery County Council – Public Comment

From:

James Keller

SUBJECT Subdivision Regulation Amendment (SRA) 25-01, Administrative Subdivision – Expedited Approval Plan

Short title. This zoning text amendment may be cited as part of the 26 “More Housing N.O.W. (New Options for Workers)” package.

I am James Keller. For over 20 years, I have lived in a single-family detached home located almost midway between Richard Montgomery High School and Rockville High School. By 2029, both of my children will have graduated from Rockville High. Prior to living in Rockville, I lived in North Bethesda, or what I call Southern Rockville.

The ostensible purpose of the “NOW Package or the NOW Plan” is to help reduce the cost of homeownership which the authors claim stands at an average of about \$1 million per home. The US Census (Census.gov) reports that the median value in our Country is \$600,000; almost two-fold lower than stated in the NOW Plan, which implies a mixed-motive among the authors of the Plan. Averages and medians are not the same, and the average exaggerates the financial strains. However, I see the authors have put a lot of time into developing their plan, and it seems to be a very thorough plan, and represents much hard work. Still, I am opposed to it for now, for the following reasons:

Community prosperity always comes in multiple stages but political and civic goals usually focus on one idealistic goal at a time. In England, for example, 200 years ago, population growth matched food production. In about 60 years, London’s population grew from 1 million to 3 million because food production tripled. However, in spite of this prosperity, living space became scarce. Living standards decreased and poverty became worse because of over-crowding.

Responsible growth, therefore, requires balancing all resources before they become scarce, including attention to roads, water availability, emergency services and

comfortable public schools where children are safe from over-crowding. We don't want squalor to be perpetuated in spite of our good political intentions.

Home availability in the US is always a moral dilemma. Whether we talk about a 20 million dollar residence versus a 2 million dollar home, or \$2 million versus \$200,000, or \$200,000 versus a family living in poverty on \$40,000, the moral dilemma is the same at each level. If an owner of an apartment complex allows homeless people to live there for free, some of the former homeless will sub-let the place to homeless who arrived late to the party. The former homeless guy creates the same moral dilemma as any of the other levels described above.

The NOW Plan does not address the lack of resources that will result when unoccupied office buildings are repurposed or rebuilt entirely as family homes. The plan should first aim to protect the quality of life in the community that already exists.

For example, if the plan proposed to convert apartments into condominiums, such a change would be ok because it would not alter population dynamics or cause over-crowding. The NOW Plan, on the other hand, will strain existing resources across the county without a clear strategy to accommodate existing residents. The assumption is that resources will always be available, which is not a fair or decent assumption.

If Montgomery County were a lifeboat, the authors of the NOW Plan want to help people climb aboard but behind the scenes, I think good political intentions might be manipulated by landowners who cannot make money from their empty office buildings. These empty buildings were built assuming that Washington DC bureaucracy would be unchanging or ever-growing. These buildings were bad business mistakes. The Montgomery County government should not bail out these business families on the premise that the bailout will help poorer families own homes.

In terms of the purely charitable angle to aid the dream of homeownership...I grew up in Southern California in the 1970s-1990s. My 40-year high school reunion is this year. I have written a small booklet for my former classmates in which I wrote the following:

If California were to pay to build 200,000 small homes for 200,000 lower-income people, then California taxpayers must destroy part of the Earth's environment to manufacture, transport and assemble enough lumber, sewer pipe, electrical wiring, water lines, light bulbs, solar panels, heat pumps, etc., to make the houses. Whoever owns the land or builds on it profits dramatically.

But immediately after giving the homes away, California would have to provide 200,000 new refrigerators. And after they gave the refrigerators, the government would need to produce 3 million pounds of free food to support everyone in need. Whoever makes the

refrigerators and grows the food will profit. Maybe the 200,000 former “homeless” will find jobs. Maybe not.

And if you give the working poor all of those resources, along with new furniture...they will use the new beds to make new babies. As babies are born and grow, the California government will need to build more schools or jam children into existing, crowded classrooms. And regardless of the school crowding situation, back inside of those free homes, many of the 200,000 former poor would begin sub-letting rooms to new working poor who arrived late...to the 200,001st and so on.

And, even if you could overcome all of the logistical and social obstacles, and you succeeded to help all of these 200,000 people, your “successful” government program would attract more migrants and immigrants from around the world which would put Californians back to square one perpetually. The charitable angle, therefore, will always look down and see poverty but it will never see the crowded dysfunction that it helped to create.

California can pump crude oil to pay for this until they run out of space; until they are pressed too tightly against the deserts, mountains and the Pacific Ocean. However, whether space is available or not, civic charities anywhere on Earth cannot serve both sides: Either you destroy a substantial part of the environment to grow the economy and perpetually give free land to the ever-increasing working poor or you make laws to protect the environment, stifle the economy a little, hinder population growth and manage the working poor in less generous ways.

Therefore, to avoid the above cycle, you must either expand the borders while increasing critical resources for the entire community (conquering new realms to expand the empire) or you must destroy one part of the community to help another part profit. You might try to hinder population growth, reign in pollution & slow down economic frothiness to reduce strife, crowding, and environmental destruction. However, a growing economy must, by definition, make pollution to provide employment and homes. And since pollution is always produced when resources are transformed into useable things, pollution must be made when helping the working poor because...Life makes waste, by definition.

Montgomery County does not have crude oil to pump and sell like California. And, I believe most adults in the County are government employees (federal, state and local). I have taught my children that without Washington D.C. and the federal government, Maryland would be a farm. We have outgrown our ability to provide for ourselves. And as government spending and employment in the region declines, Montgomery County will become top-heavy and might sink under the strain of too many people who have too few skills to build

anything. Spa days, doggy exercise gyms, new shoes and another car dealership on Rockville Pike will not take up the slack from so much wealth pumped into the region from outside of Maryland. We will be like an over-filled lifeboat where no one knows how to navigate and no one has enough space to paddle or steer.