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From the Baltimore Sun

Getting ahead of the game

Workshop focuses on coping with region's projected growth

By Timothy B. Wheeler
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If you think the Baltimore-Washington area is too crowded, just where would you put an additional 1.2 million people if you had to?

That was the challenge taken up yesterday by 250 planners, developers, community activists and elected officials from throughout Central Maryland.

United by little more than a belief that the region cannot afford to keep growing the way it has been, people frequently at odds over development plans hunched over tables in the Baltimore Convention Center and played a good-natured planning game with a serious intent.

Stacking colored Legos like poker chips on a giant map of the region, they pondered and debated where to put the increased population projected for the next 25 years, inside or outside the beltways girdling Baltimore and Washington, or along major highway and rail corridors. Plastic toy blocks of different colors represented housing and jobs.

The abstract nature of the game probably kept fights from erupting, but not clashing visions of the future for Central Maryland, which has 4.1 million residents.

"That's sprawl," suggested Nancy Floreen, a Montgomery County Council member, as she eyed a clump of white, yellow and blue Legos that her table-mates had placed on the map in Bel Air. They symbolized the thousands of new homes and jobs proposed for the Harford County community.

"That's realistic," countered Col. Kenneth O. McCreedy, commander of Fort Meade in Anne Arundel County. Wearing his camouflage uniform, McCreedy reminded the group at the table that tens of thousands of jobs are destined to relocate in the next several years to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Harford and to his Army installation as a result of a nationwide base reshuffling by the Pentagon.

The daylong workshop, dubbed Reality Check Plus, is the third of four being held around Maryland in a yearlong effort that organizers hope will yield a new blueprint for the state's long-term growth.

Similar sessions have been held on the Eastern Shore and in Western Maryland, and another next week will focus on Southern Maryland.

"We want to be the key to change," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of 1000 Friends of Maryland, a group advocating more compact development. Other sponsors were the Urban Land Institute's Baltimore branch, representing developers, and the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education at the [University of Maryland, College Park](#).

The exercises, each of which has drawn hundreds of participants, are being held as polls find many Maryland residents unhappy about the fast pace of growth in their communities.

In a tacit recognition of the public's concern, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley and Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, who are vying for the Democratic nomination for governor this year, showed up to welcome the crowd and to promote their records as advocates for sensible growth.

They sat down to play the game briefly before slipping out, pleading other commitments.

"We need to do thinking outside the box," Duncan told the group. "The jobs are coming; the people are coming. Where are we going to put them all?"

O'Malley, who followed Duncan to the podium, acknowledged the concerns of suburban residents about traffic congestion and overcrowded schools. He urged participants to put their job and housing Legos on the map inside Baltimore, saying the city is pushing redevelopment in a bid to rebuild its population. "We welcome it," he said.

In interviews, Duncan and O'Malley criticized the growth-management policies of Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., saying he has cut funds for preserving land from development while not doing enough to promote transit or redevelopment.

"We need to get back to Smart Growth policies in the state," Duncan said, referring to the pioneering sprawl-fighting laws adopted a decade ago under Democratic Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

Audrey E. Scott, the state secretary of planning, defended Ehrlich, who was invited but did not attend. Pointing to the governor's Priority Places initiative, which has offered state help on six redevelopment projects around the state, Scott said, "My governor is extremely involved and committed to Smart Growth."

Scott told the workshop participants over lunch that the military base realignment would pose stiff challenges for the region, as planners project 60,000 to 120,000 new arrivals within three to six years.

"Twenty years in planning jargon is the blink of an eye," she said. "Three to six years is an emergency."

Most participants seemed to respond by filling Baltimore's outline on the map with Legos and by placing other Legos along highways and rail lines, and around Washington's Capital Beltway. Others argued for putting jobs, and at least some housing, in the near and far suburbs.

At Scott's table, black Legos representing low-density housing were scattered around the map.

"I lost that battle," she said.

At the end of the day, an instant analysis of the Lego future constructed by 25 tables of participants revealed that they had proposed relatively modest shifts in current patterns of growth, with small increases in housing and jobs near transit lines and in designated growth areas. The percentage of development inside the beltways slipped slightly.

But with growth pressures spreading ever farther into rural areas of the state, even maintaining housing and job densities in the region would be a change of direction, said Gerrit Knaap, director of UM's Smart Growth Research Center.

Reality Check Plus organizers said they plan to produce a more detailed report on the workshop by autumn and hope to mobilize public sentiment for changes in laws and policies to accomplish the growth participants favor.

For Marsha McLaughlin, Howard County's planning director, the satisfaction of directing growth where the participant thinks it should go, without regard for political pressures, was tempered by the future reality it represented.

"It's fun to play with blocks," she said, but she added that she wasn't sure what would come of it.

With most participants choosing to place new housing and jobs along rail and subway lines, she said, she hopes that might build public support for upgrading the region's transit system.

"It takes a lot of will to find the money," she said.

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