Mapping Out a Future For Southern Maryland

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About 150 people attended a Reality Check Plus event aimed at managing projected business and housing growth.
(Photos By James A. Parcell -- The Washington Post)

It was like a convention of Risk players.

Serious folks -- bent over maps, brows furrowed -- moved pieces around, surrendering and buttressing domains. But the objective of the game was to manage growth in Southern Maryland, not to take over the globe.

From appearances, though, the stakes might have been just as high at Table 10, one of 15 spread out in the gymnasium at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where about 150 community, government and business leaders sparred last Thursday over the allocation of projected growth in the region.

The event was the last of four such regional exercises sponsored by Reality Check Plus, a privately funded coalition dedicated to creating a vision of how Maryland should look in 30 years, and then identifying policies to achieve that vision.

"Look at that," lamented Millie Kriemelmeyer, pointing to a crop of white Lego pieces that Derek Watson placed around the Newburg side of the Gov. Harry W. Nice Memorial Bridge on the Charles County map.

The Legos represented an army of new homes and jobs. Kriemelmeyer, a trustee of the Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust, was doubtful that the infrastructure, let alone the ecosystem, could handle it.

"Who knows a bridge builder?" she called out as she went to get a drink.

"There you go," ribbed Watson, a general manager at Chaney Enterprises, a Waldorf construction materials company. "I'm going to get rid of all the black pieces while you get your water."

Across the table, Karen Edgecombe sat at the northern end of Calvert County. She grouped single white Legos (low-density housing) around North Beach and folded her arms.

"I'm not happy putting any more down," said Edgecombe, executive director of the American Chestnut Land Trust.

"And I understand and respect your position," said Denis Canavan, director of the Department of Land Use and Growth Management in St. Mary's County, as he plunked a spire of blue Legos on Lexington Park.

There are 78,000 households and 71,000 jobs coming to Southern Maryland over the next 25 years, according to projections by the Maryland Department of Planning. Working with those estimates, each group of eight to 10 people received Lego pieces that had to be placed somewhere on a table-sized map of Southern Maryland.

"I want you to throw out all your notions of how the land is zoned," announced John W. Frece, associate director of the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education, before the exercise began. "Visualize how you would like to see this growth spread across the map."

Each table featured a mix of developers, preservationists, elected officials and private business people from the three Southern Maryland counties. Each participant came to the table with his or her own vision of what Southern Maryland could look like in 2030. Each group was charged with working toward a communal vision.

"This is an excellent exercise," said Canavan as he fitted Legos inside the grids representing Lexington Park. "But what you tend to lose with the Legos is a sense of intensity."

Each four-pegged Lego was as small as a piece of Starburst candy, but represented 160 acres of land as well as 520 households or 470 jobs, depending on color. Yellow pieces equaled workforce housing, black was very low-density housing, white was all other types of housing and blue was commercial and industrial.

The location of the Legos varied from group to group, but most concentrated the bulk of growth around existing town centers: Waldorf, Lexington Park, Prince Frederick. Charlotte Hall also received a significant Lego allotment.

Conversation at some tables got into details that, although not germane to the exercise, were provocative: the threat of a water supply shortage, the aesthetics of the interplay

between housing and infrastructure (such as roads and water lines), the flight of young people from the Southern Maryland workforce, the eventual need for a light-rail system.

Most people haggled over these issues, but everyone agreed on at least two things: Growth needs to be addressed on a regional level, and it needs to be mediated with respect to environmentally sensitive areas.

Table 10 facilitator Trina Wacasey, a training manager at Texas A&M University, said it was fascinating to see her group cram the existing town centers with Legos in an effort to preserve the map's green areas.

"I can understand the desire to protect the open space," she said. "Yesterday, I went from National Airport with all that congestion, and I sat in traffic for two hours until I got to Waldorf. Once we got to Maryland 5, it was beautiful and green and open and hilly."

NG&O Engineering Inc. engineer Brenice Crissman, unconvinced the exercise had a practical purpose, didn't think there could be a suitable compromise between rural preservation and the intensity of growth projected by the state planning department.

"You can't have it both ways," Crissman said. "You can't have convenience *and* affordability, and have preservation."

While the participants ate lunch during a break in the day-long exercise, facilitators translated each table's Lego-ridden maps into numbers and grids. At the end of the day, preliminary results and averages were presented by Gerrit Knaap, executive director of the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education.

"Compared with existing conditions, you envision a future with more development in PFAs [Priority Funding Areas], greater protection of resource lands and open space, a greater jobs-housing balance and greater regional cooperation," Knaap said after presenting color-coded three-dimensional maps of Southern Maryland in the year 2030, as posited by the participants.

In September, Reality Check Plus will publish a packet of material that combines the results from each of the four regional exercises into a statewide vision of projected growth.

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