



maryland news

Reality differs a bit from people's words, actions on growth

On the Bay: Tom Horton

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Why am I scowling?

I'm looking at a snowy-day picture of wild swans serenely afloat on a wooded cove.

It's in a gorgeous brochure: "Chesapeake, A National Treasure," from a commission representing legislators from Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The picture caption soothes: "The restoration of the Chesapeake requires a balance, allowing the human population to prosper while the native fish and wildlife are provided with ample habitat, clean water."

It's a good goal. But let me edit in a little reality:

The restoration of the Chesapeake is unbalanced. In the name of prosperity, we encourage the human population to grow without limit while deluding ourselves we can provide the native fish and wildlife with ample habitat, clean water.

Since 1950, population in the bay's six-state watershed has doubled, to about 16 million - and if there's been a political or economic leader in that time who opposed this, I'm not aware of it.

In Maryland, projections are we'll add another 1.1 million to 1.5 million to our current 5.6 million between now and 2030.

And "the more the better" remains our mantra, judging from state and local leaders' uniform joy over recent military realignments that will bring 10,000 new workers into Maryland.

There are only two ways to inject some truth into notions of a sustainable balance between humans and nature here.

One would be a national campaign to stabilize U.S. population by reducing the record number of immigrants, and by slowing our fertility rate, highest of any industrialized democracy.

This is doable without extreme or culturally unacceptable measures, but has little traction, even from environmental groups who should be ashamed of ducking the issue.

The only other thing we can do is to grow smarter, guiding growth around where it exists, ensuring the sewer, water, school and road infrastructure is there to handle it.

At the same time, we need the flip side of the Smart Growth coin. We must use zoning and tools such as paying landowners for development rights to keep farms, forests and other open spaces intact.

You'd think Maryland, fifth most-densely peopled of all the states, would be demanding Smart Growth, which it virtually invented under Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

But there are major disconnects between what we want and what we're doing.

"Slow the growth, state's voters say," was the recent headline on a Sun poll showing a majority across the state are tired of rapid development.

Good luck. With no attention to population, and an economy built upon paving, clearing, homebuilding, real estate and other growth-dependent business, slower growth's a pipe dream.

"I don't see how you can slow it with an economy like ours, next to Washington, D.C., and with our decent quality of life," says John Frece of the National Center for Smart Growth in College Park.

Frece says that rather than wishing for slower growth, people need to deal with putting it where it's smart - socially, environmentally and fiscally - and with keeping it out of the countryside.

Trouble is, he and other growth experts say, we're headed the opposite way. Consider the most recent examples of dumb growth, hardly the only ones as sprawl development continues unabated.

In Allegany County, where the city of Cumberland struggles for lack of growth and redevelopment, a developer got a zoning exemption for 4,300 housing units, to be known as Terrapin Run, on some of Maryland's most scenic and remote lands.

This travesty will border public forests and hunting areas, impact trout streams and rural roads, develop on septic and be 15 to 30 miles from the nearest schools.

Then there's Cambridge's recent annexation of land sprawling far from where development would help the town revitalize. It will allow thousands of new homes on low-lying soils near the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

In both cases, the state, whose governor is said to embrace Smart Growth "in principle," has signaled it won't interfere with local land use.

"Counties are still just reacting to what developers want," says Dru Schmidt-Perkins of 1000 Friends of Maryland, a land-use group.

There are several reasons for that, Frece says.

There's the anywhere-but-my-backyard-syndrome; also developers and builders are the biggest donors to county officials - "they continue to trump planners on where growth goes," he says.

Another reason, Frece thinks, is "people don't have confidence in the quality of development" to be livable, an enhancement to the older community. "If they did, they might support it around where they live."

This summer, the Smart Growth Center and other groups will be starting Reality Check Plus, a statewide series of workshops to develop a vision of where people would put the inevitable growth.

They aim to put the blueprint that emerges in front of the candidates for governor next fall.

While awaiting Reality Check, you might go Friday to Easton, where the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy is holding a daylong conference, "Taking On the Growth Machine" (eslc.org).

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