

## CHAPTER 12: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

### Goals

- Increase citizen awareness of, and participation in, planning issues and processes and development decisions

Citizen participation is an important component in the process of developing comprehensive and functional plans and in the decision-making process of approving development plans. The citizens of the Westminster environs community have various opportunities to participate in and influence the County's decision-making relating to the future development in their community. Public participation includes activities such as voting for elected officials, running for public office, attending public meetings and hearings conducted by elected officials or appointed boards or commissions, attending public workshops or committee meetings, and participating as members of committees or appointed boards or commissions. The Carroll County Board of Commissioners appoint qualified citizens to numerous boards and commissions, including: Planning and Zoning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, Environmental Affairs Advisory Board, Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, Board Of License Commissioners, Historic Preservation Commission, Economic Development Commission, Industrial Development Authority, Children's Council, Commission on Aging, Recreation and Parks Board, and Board of Social Services.

### Current Conditions

Several formal opportunities are available to the citizens of the Westminster environs community to voice their concerns and provide input on issues that are important to them.

#### *1 Current Citizen Participation Opportunities*

##### **A ⇨ Carroll County Planning and Zoning Commission**

The seven-member (plus alternate) Planning and Zoning Commission is an appointed body responsible for such planning-related activities as developing and approving comprehensive plans, approving subdivision and site development plans, and recommending a Community Investment Plan to the County Commissioners. The Planning Commission also recommends to the County Commissioners amendments to planning-related regulations and ordinances such as the subdivision regulations and zoning ordinance (ordinance text and zoning map). The Planning Commission holds a public meeting on a regular monthly basis to consider planning-related projects and issues. Citizens are welcome to attend. The Planning Commission is required to hold public hearings to receive input on comprehensive plan elements, updates, or amendments. The Planning Commission considers the comments received before approving the plan and submitting it to the County Commissioners for adoption.

##### **B ⇨ The Planning Process**

Article 66B of the Annotated Code of Maryland mandates that the planning commission develop and approve a comprehensive plan and recommend it to the local legislative body for adoption. Community meetings and workshops are held to encourage citizen input to help ensure

that the vision and goals of the plan reflect the desires of the community.

### **C ⇨ Carroll County Board of Commissioners**

The three-member Board of Carroll County Commissioners is the local legislative body for the unincorporated areas of the county, including the study area. These elected officials have the final decision-making authority over many issues that affect the Westminster environs community. The Board is required by law to hold public hearings on changes to a diversity of regulations and plans such as zoning maps, the zoning ordinance, the subdivision regulations, and the Water and Sewer Master Plan, prior to any final action. The law mandates that these public hearings be duly advertised in local newspapers. All public meetings and hearings conducted by the Board are open to citizens for their input.

The ultimate opportunity to influence local public policy and decision-making is to vote for candidates for County Commissioner or run as a County Commissioner candidate.

### **D ⇨ Carroll County Board of Zoning Appeals**

The Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) is a quasi-judicial body comprised of five (plus an alternate) members. The Board is empowered to hear and decide on requests for conditional uses and to authorize appeals for variances to the zoning ordinance. The BZA may also hear and decide appeals to orders, requirements, decisions, or determinations that are made by an administrative officer in the enforcement of Article 66B or any ordinance adopted under the article. These cases may involve, for example, appeals to actions of the Planning Commission. The BZA conducts public hearings to address all cases that are filed for its review and action. Public hearing notices are published in local newspapers, signs are posted on properties under review, and notices of the public hearings are mailed to adjoining property owners. The public hearings and notification of them provide an important opportunity for citizen input to these cases.

### **E ⇨ Carroll County Subdivision Advisory Committee**

Citizens have an opportunity for input in the early stages of the review and approval process involved with the development of property. The Subdivision Advisory Committee (SAC) is comprised of County and State agencies that review and comment on subdivision and site development plans. SAC meets monthly to review publicly all development plans submitted to the County and to present its recommendations and requirements to the owner/developer of the property and their engineer. When a property owner is contemplating the improvement or subdivision of his or her property, notices of the SAC meeting are mailed to adjoining property owners and signs are posted on the property informing the public of the scheduled SAC meeting. Citizens are invited to attend the SAC meeting to voice their concerns on the proposed development at this early design stage.

## **2      *Government Structure***

The Board of Carroll County Commissioners is the local legislative body for the study area. The three members of the Board are elected at large for four-year terms. The County Commissioners serve as both an executive and legislative body, deriving their powers from the state legislature through enabling legislation. Since Carroll County is neither a code nor charter county, the Maryland Legislature must adopt many of the laws that govern the County.

In terms of State representation, the Westminster Election District is located in the Fifth Legislative District, which is represented by one Senator and three Delegates in the Maryland Legislature in Annapolis. At the Federal level, the planning area is located in the Sixth Congressional District, which is represented by one member of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. Two Senators in the U.S. Senate also represent the State as a whole.

### 3 *Citizen Information Sources*

#### **A ⇨ Media**

Residents in the Westminster area have a variety of sources of information to keep informed of local events and activities. The *Carroll County Times* and the Carroll County edition of *The Baltimore Sun* are general-circulation daily for-purchase newspapers that focus on news in Carroll County, in addition to providing regional, state, national, and world news. Landmark Community Newspapers of Maryland, Inc., publisher of the *Carroll County Times*, also circulates two free monthly publications, *Carroll Families* and *Carroll Seniors*. These periodicals contain feature stories and County activities aimed at families and senior citizens, respectively.

Numerous television and radio stations broadcast regional news and information that may include Carroll County. WTTR (1470 AM), located in Westminster, focuses on Carroll County news and events. In addition to its standard offering of network and cable stations, the county's cable television service provider, Adelphia, operates Cablevision Channel 3, a commercial local origination channel that covers local news and events, and Channel 24 (CCG24), a new channel devoted to Carroll County Government that will broadcast public meetings, events, and other programs related to local government. Additionally, Adelphia broadcasts Carroll Community Television Channel 19, Carroll Community College Television Channel 18, and Carroll Educational Television Channel 21 (sponsored by Carroll County Public Schools), noncommercial local access channels that include information on local news and events as part of their scheduled programming.

Carroll County Government posts its legal ads in the *Carroll County Times* and provides press releases to the media regarding current events and issues. Additionally, notices of upcoming meetings are provided for inclusion in the community news and events sections of local papers. The County also uses WTTR, Cablevision Channel 3 and Carroll Community Television Channel 19 to convey public information.

#### **B ⇨ Internet**

The Internet is a growing resource of information for citizens. One website that contains information oriented to Carroll County is located at <http://www.ccgov.carr.org>. This site contains extensive information on the County, County government, municipalities located in the County, public library system, schools, services and organizations, and business.

On-line information related to updates of the community comprehensive plans can be found on the county website's page for the Department of Planning within the Bureau of Comprehensive Planning section.

## C ⇔ Comprehensive Plan Components

Citizen participation is an extremely important component of the process of updating a comprehensive plan for a community. As a result, each community plan update process involves several components that allow property owners to remain informed of the progress and proposals being made. Chief among these are newsletters, community workshops, surveys, and informational meetings.

The first newsletter for the Westminster Environs Community Comprehensive Plan was sent out in May 1999 at the beginning of the update process. It described the update process, gave some background information on the last comprehensive plan and community demographics, and informed people of the dates and locations for upcoming community meetings. This was followed in June 1999 with a survey sent to all study area households. In summer 1999, a series of three community workshops were held (see Chapters 3 for more information). The second newsletter was sent out in Winter 1999-2000. It described the vision and goals for the plan that were developed as a result of the community meetings and survey responses. It also provided a summary of the survey results and community workshops, and described the next steps in the process. The last newsletter, sent out in August 2004, included all of the potential recommendations to be considered for inclusion in the draft plan. A community information meeting was held during the 60-day review period for the draft plan.

### **Analysis of Community Needs**

As previously noted, numerous opportunities currently exist for the community to be involved in government related issues. The County government holds regular public meetings on pending issues and development related activities. Up-to-date information is also readily available on the County website. Various community workshops, surveys, newsletters, and information sessions are also conducted as part of the comprehensive plan update process. All of these opportunities amount to ample avenues for the public to receive information about and provide input on planning issues and specific plan updates.

Most of the residents indicated in the community surveys that they receive most of their information on government-related events through local newspapers or by word of mouth. But despite advertisement of public meetings and workshops for plan updates in the newspapers, attendance at these events generally has been very low. This means that many citizens are unaware of the plans for their community. Additionally, it is fairly typical that only those who oppose the plan or portions of it voice their opinion, while those who support the plan or otherwise would not oppose it remain silent. The effect is that a very small number of people often influence decisions meant to address the good of a much larger community.

Although a need always exists for local governments to find additional ways to solicit input from a greater number of citizens, there also is an element of social and political apathy that must be addressed as well. One major impediment to overcoming the relative public apathy associated with the planning process is the length of time taken to produce the plans. Momentum built up in the initial phase of the public participation quickly is lost when the plans go into the “drafting” stage, where shifting priorities for staff and lengthy writing requirements can create a lag time of at least six months, sometimes much more.

## **Recommended Actions**

- *Survey the community periodically to ensure that the desires of the residents are still being accomplished and to identify new desires*

The success of a comprehensive planning effort is not just measured when the plan is adopted. It is an ongoing challenge to ensure that the plan continues to embody the desires of the community and is being implemented as recommended. Because old residents and businesses are continually leaving and new ones taking their place, the population served by the plan is always changing. Periodic surveys of the population about their goals and concerns for the environs will inform planners and others who are implementing the plan as to how well the plan is upholding or changing to meet the needs of the community.

- *Continue to provide updates on projects, events, and the implementation of specific plan recommendations through a community newsletter or website*

Part of making a comprehensive plan a “living document” is to keep its relevance in the forefront of people’s minds. While this is more easily accomplished with those whose job it is to implement the plan, providing the general citizenry with updates on the progress of implementation will help them to understand the importance of the document and how it affects their everyday lives, and should provide some encouragement to them to participate in future planning efforts as well.

- *Form citizen committees to implement appropriate strategies from the comprehensive plan as well as other community projects*

One of the best ways to keep citizens involved in the planning process is to vest them by giving them some measure of oversight or responsibility for implementing plans. Citizen committees that are charged with the implementation of specific items contained in the plan could serve as an opportunity for people to become involved in the process and perform the critical function of putting the plan’s recommendations into effect.

- *Find ways in which the plan update process can be shortened to maintain interest and momentum*

One of the greatest challenges posed by the planning process is finding ways to keep people’s interest and momentum throughout an effort that, by its very nature, is methodical and time-consuming. Great lengths are taken to reach out to as many people as possible and much time is spent gathering the information that will validate the plan’s recommendations. More frequent plan updates could reduce the amount of time needed to do this work, and concentrated points of public input could be programmed into the process so that momentum is not lost. Other creative ways to achieve these objectives should be sought as well.

## **Fiscal Implications & Anticipated Capital Improvements Projects**

*The recommendations contained in this plan may be policy-oriented or action-oriented, and their implementation may be the responsibility of the County, other public agencies, private landowners and developers, or a combination of these. This section is designed to identify the potential fiscal impacts to the County of each of the recommendations. There could be “No Fiscal Impact,” meaning the County would not incur direct or*

*predictable expenses as a result of implementing the recommendation, an “Undetermined Impact,” meaning there likely would be a cost associated with implementing the recommendation but that cost can not be determined at this time for various reasons, or a “Fiscal Impact,” which likely would be incurred by the County if the recommendation were implemented. For recommendations that have an identified fiscal impact, the cost of implementing that recommendation is estimated to the best degree possible.*

- Survey the community periodically to ensure that the desires of the residents are still being accomplished and to identify new desires  
*Fiscal Impact: The cost associated with surveying the community would depend upon the method used to conduct the survey. A standard mailed survey would cost approximately \$6,912 (\$.08 to print two pages, double-sided for each of 9000 surveys, \$.344 to mail them out, and the same amount to have them all returned), while a postcard mailed to property owners asking them to log on to our website and fill out a survey would cost approximately \$1,998 (\$.04 to print one page, double-sided for 2,250 pages (4 postcards per page) and \$.212 to mail 9000 postcards.)*
- Continue to provide updates on projects and events occurring within the area through a community newsletter or website  
*Undetermined Impact: While there likely would be a cost associated with the implementation of this recommendation, the project needs more development before a reasonable cost estimate can be determined.*
- Form citizen committees to implement appropriate strategies from the comprehensive plan as well as other community projects  
*No Fiscal Impact*
- Find ways in which the plan update process can be shortened so that interest and momentum is not lost  
*No Fiscal Impact*