

## CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY INPUT

In order that the greatest amount and diversity of input into the comprehensive planning process might be achieved, a variety of avenues for feedback were built into the process. Interviews with community leaders and elected officials were conducted, a survey was mailed to all of the households in the study area, and three community workshops were conducted. Additionally, three newsletters were produced throughout the process and public information meetings and hearing were held on the draft plan. The results of these efforts are summarized below, and more complete responses can be found in the appendix.

### **Interviews with Community Leaders and Officials**

Community leaders and officials perceived a lot of positive aspects about the community, as well as many challenges that need to be addressed in order to create and maintain a high quality of life for residents and business owners in the study area. The greatest assets were believed to be the area's central location within the County, its high quality of educational facilities, the attractive and vibrant downtown, and the good economic potential. At the same time, it was recognized that a number of challenges face the area in order to improve or maintain a high quality of life. Chief among these are managing growth, improving infrastructure, and building a strong economic base.

Participants believed growth management could be achieved by directing growth to existing areas of development and pacing it with infrastructure improvements. Improvements to infrastructure were felt to be closely linked to the health of the local economy and the joint coordination and financing of projects between the City, County, and State. At the same time, the participants felt that a growth area boundary was important to contain growth and project future demand for infrastructure and services, but they did not favor a population limit.

Economic development was viewed as a priority for establishing and maintaining a high quality of life. Participants did not feel that the area should become a residential "bedroom community." Rather they were keen on attracting high-paying professional jobs to employment areas along the major corridors and downtown that would add to the tax base and reduce the need for area residents to commute long distances. They believed local government should provide incentives to attract these types of employers. At the same time, there was a recognition that some residents will continue to commute to the Baltimore and Washington metropolitan areas and that some type of transit, such as shuttle buses, could improve their commute and ease the burden on local roadways. Other transportation improvements, such as expanding existing or constructing new highways and establishing a network of pedestrian and bicycle trails, remained priorities as well.

Additional community development issues that were raised included the need to strengthen and revitalize Main Street as a vital part of the area's economic and cultural life, and the need to provide a range of housing options that would be affordable to a diversity of families and individuals.

### **Survey**

In order to reach as many people as possible for their input, a survey of public opinion on

planning-related issues was mailed to all households in Election District 7 in June 1999. An excellent response rate of nearly 24% meant that the surveys returned represented a good cross-section of area residents.

The survey was divided into two sections: one that asked multiple choice and open-answer questions about quality of life issues, and one that asked respondents to give their opinion on specific issues by indicating whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

The vast majority of survey respondents felt they enjoyed a very high or high quality of life. The qualities most cited as reasons why people chose to live in the Westminster community and what they liked most about it were the rural and small town atmosphere, the feeling of safety, the closeness of family, and the affordability of homes. Conversely, they least liked the traffic, new development, and crowded schools. These issues also were viewed as the most challenging issues facing the community in the future.

The greatest need identified for recreational facilities was bicycle and pedestrian trails. Other popular responses were wooded areas, picnic areas, and a swimming pool.

Respondents generally did not feel well informed about the amount and location of future development, but were somewhat more comfortable with their knowledge about future public facilities and transportation. They were neutral in their opinion about opportunities for public input on County issues.

In terms of where they would prefer to see new shopping and business development, there was more support for increased opportunities in the downtown rather than on MD 140. However, there was support for pedestrian and aesthetic improvements to MD 140. Respondents also expressed support for a mixed-use downtown that contains residential uses as well as a variety of business and commercial uses.

There was strong support for protecting open space and maintaining separation between residential, commercial, and industrial uses. At the same time, respondents favored more traditional, compact neighborhood design and architecture that blended with the existing architectural character. There was strong support for preserving agricultural land outside of the designated growth area. Greenways were supported as well, though more people favored the concept of greenways than the actual possibility of having one go through their neighborhood.

When asked whether they supported increasing the amount of industrial land in the community or restricting the number of commercial uses allowed in the industrial districts, responses were neutral. Most were opposed to raising taxes, particularly to pay for new facilities and services. There was little interest in expanding transit service, even within the community.

## **Workshops**

A series of three workshops were held in the evenings of May 26, June 23, and August 3, 1999 at Westminster High School. In the workshops, participants were asked to identify their desires for the community's future (i.e., vision) and goals for the comprehensive plan that would serve to achieve the vision.

## 1 Workshop #1

### A ⇔ Probable Future

Workshop participants first were asked to visualize the probable future of the community. The probable future could be described as how things would be in the future if no changes were made to shift current trends.

Participants believed that growth would continue to be a major issue. This growth would lead to urban sprawl that would both diminish farmland and multiply the amount of traffic and crime. The increased population would lead to residential developments outside of the city area. This would increase pressure to provide big box retail closer to these neighborhoods. As a result, the use of existing businesses and services in the City of Westminster would decrease. The participants also predicted that the proposed bypass and additional roads would bring congested traffic patterns. This would promote a need for a public mass transit system to be established for those commuting within and outside of Westminster city limits.

### B ⇔ External Opportunities and Threats

Workshop participants then were asked to examine the external forces that have an effect on the community, either by creating opportunities for the area or threatening the city in general. The participants stated how they felt these forces would influence the Westminster environs area in the future.

***Growth Management and Land Use.*** When asked to describe the opportunities created by growth management and land use, the participants acknowledged that the Smart Growth initiative would facilitate growth among the already populated areas, and would develop more pleasant communities. Growth management, they felt, would allow for the improvement of both short range and long range planning processes to take preventive measures against over-development. The participants also felt that land use management would allow for the possible expansion of both commercial and industrial businesses.

However, the participants also felt that growth management and land use created certain threats. They believe that development, especially urban sprawl, will threaten the infrastructure by causing crowded schools and inadequate emergency services. The participants stated that this development would also cause population shifts from Baltimore City and County areas. They also cited continued growth as a threat to the aesthetics of the area, causing congestion and unneeded shopping centers.

***Transportation.*** The participants next expressed the opportunities that they felt were created by transportation. They felt that the bypass and Smart Growth initiatives would relieve congested traffic in and around the Westminster environs area. They stated that traffic planning helps to solve long-term transportation problems.

When discussing the threats that transportation creates in the Westminster area, the participants in the workshop stated that the bypass and further road construction may destroy rural areas and farmland in the future. They cited the need to hire expert traffic consultants to solve the current traffic congestion problems. The participants also affirmed the need for the extension of mass transit to combat traffic congestion and possible rising fuel costs.

***Community Facilities.*** The participants next were asked to evaluate the opportunities involving community facilities. They saw the need to develop adequate schools that could provide better educational discipline. The participants also recognized the need to set aside parkland and trails in the near future. They believed that open space could be utilized to develop recreational areas and activities. Additionally, they felt that funding from federal and state sources should be utilized for recreational events and facilities such as bike lanes and paths.

When discussing the possible threats to the community facilities in the future, the participants of the workshop stated that funding should be established for such things as combating an increase in drug use and crime in the area. They believed that the school board lacks control and is overstaffed, and that more funding for the school system should be allocated. They expressed a need for adequate facilities to be built to provide water and provide police protection.

***Natural and Agricultural Resources.*** The workshop participants next discussed the opportunities that have arisen regarding natural and agricultural resources. They declared a need for clean air goals and buffers along streams. They cited a need to maintain agricultural preservation by supporting the purchase of easements and supporting legislature to fund agricultural preservation.

The participants also saw threats to these resources in the future. They predicted increased water and air pollution along with the endangerment of species. They envisioned destruction to the environment surrounding the Westminster environs area if construction and urban sprawl continues.

***Economic Development.*** Next, the workshop participants were asked to assess the opportunities associated with economic development. They cited the need to bring in clean industry that is seeking relocation to reduce tax rates. They encouraged developments that include industrial areas also. They felt the emerging business climate at the airport presented a good opportunity to expand economic development in the area.

The participants also saw possible threats relating to economic development. They feared a lack of business and light industrial properties. They expressed a desire to develop a means of increasing the County and City tax base without increasing growth. The participants also felt the threat of a possible reduction in industrial jobs due to more progressive areas outside of Carroll County. They believed that it might be difficult to attract businesses due to lack of low cost housing in the region.

***Historic Resources.*** When the participants were asked to evaluate the opportunities brought forth by historic resources, they were pleased to see a strong desire to preserve rural heritage in Maryland, and did not see any threats by these actions.

***Community Involvement.*** The next topic the participants addressed was the role of community involvement. They agreed that this provided the ability to build cooperation between the government and the citizens.

The participants felt that the Internet and increased technology used in the house threatens the idea of community by creating an artificial environment within the home. As for community input, they cited the hospital and Ag Center expansions as examples of projects that proceeded

without the appropriate hearings or consultation from the outside community.

***Interjurisdictional Coordination.*** When asked to address the opportunities brought forth by interjurisdictional coordination, the participants of the workshop saw a need to have moderation of the local political positions. They saw a possibility of better cooperation between the City of Westminster and the County. They also felt there needed to be State support of development of properties.

The participants were able to identify a number of threats caused by interjurisdictional coordination. They saw a possibility of political backlash to conservative local politics and a probable lack of stability between the County and the State. They suggested the use of a County Manager as opposed to three County Commissioners who have varied opinions on numerous topics, thus causing political tension. The participants fear regional tax sharing. They also believed that interjurisdictional coordination creates undue pressure on County residents from Baltimore politicians to pay taxes for city entertainment and the arts.

### **C ⇔ Internal Strengths and Weaknesses**

The workshop participants next were asked to evaluate the internal strengths and weaknesses of the community regarding various topics.

***Growth Management and Land Use.*** When considering growth management and land use, the participants identified several strengths in this area. They felt that growth control has been kept to designated areas, and therefore the government still has time and space to make good decisions regarding land use before sprawl takes place. They also believed that the county still has managed to retain some green space.

The participants also identified weaknesses relating to growth management and land use. They cited a lack of discipline in maintaining the structure and focus of plans. They foresaw an inability to slow growth beyond infrastructure capabilities. The participants stated that they have observed no cooperative work between the Commissioners and the County Planning Department when decisions regarding land use is concerned. They believed that zoning ordinances should be overhauled to coincide with the Master Plan. Given current trends, they felt there was a possibility of continued lack of planning and direction in land use for the future.

***Transportation.*** When addressing transportation, the workshop participants noted a number of strengths in the County. They were pleased with road maintenance and snow removal, which was felt to be “better snow removal than most cities.” County road maintenance, in comparison to neighboring counties, was believed to be exceptional.

The participants also noted some weaknesses in the transportation efforts of the County. They believed the lack of a public transportation system was a major downfall. They also mentioned the congestion on MD 140 and at the surrounding shopping areas. They also stated that there are too many road-cuts giving access to public roads. These particular roads, although intended to be “fast bypasses”, also are becoming congested due to these open accesses.

***Community Facilities.*** The workshop participants next were asked to evaluate the strengths of the area’s community facilities. They responded by stating that the accomplishments of the school system were very impressive; it receives consistently high ratings relative to other counties in the state. They noted the excellence not only of the public schools, but of the

community college as well. They believed the community has a quality public library system. They also noted the excellent interaction between local and state police units.

Although, the participants cited the positive aspects of the facilities available to the community, they also noted some significant drawbacks as well. They stated that the public school system is both overburdened and overcrowded, and that some action must be taken to control the spending by the Board of Education. They also cited a need for centralization of services such as fire, police, and waste removal.

***Natural and Agricultural Resources.*** The participants next discussed the strengths of the natural and agricultural resources in the area. They were pleased to see farmers willing to put land into agricultural preservation, and noted the fact that Carroll County is leading the nation in ag preservation. They noted that persons moving to this area still perceive Carroll County as having both a rural nature and healthy environment in which to reside.

They also identified several weaknesses relating to the area's natural and agricultural resources. They discussed a lack of concern for streams and wetlands and the environment of the community in general. Environmental education initiatives were suggested as ways to inform people about what needs to be done to preserve these resources. It also was noted that the public needs to be aware of the fact that the area is quickly losing the feeling of being an agricultural community.

***Economic Development.*** The workshop participants were next asked to discuss the positive aspects to economic development. They agreed that one of the strengths of the County's economic development efforts was the desire to support small business. They cited the environs area as having an active and helpful chamber of commerce, and thus having a good business community. They noted the development of the Air Business Center as a positive aspect of economic development also.

The subject of economic development also brought forth some negative comments from the workshop participants as well. They felt that a weakness of economic development in the area was the lack of incentives for industrial businesses to locate in a relatively sparsely populated area such as Carroll County. They also noted the number of citizens that feel that they must leave the area to work. A lack of cooperation between the government and the business community was perceived, as was the perception that several government agencies claim they are business friendly, but in reality are not. They also discussed the lack of competition for the County cable company, which allows it to provide poor cable services.

***Historic, Cultural, and Archeological Resources.*** The workshop participants were asked to discuss the strengths relating to historic/cultural/archeological resources. They noted the efforts to preserve historic Main Street and the surrounding areas.

At the same time, the participants cited the lack of concern for historic preservation and parks/recreation planning as a major weakness relating to historic/cultural/archeological resources.

***Community Involvement.*** The participants next discussed the strengths of community involvement in the Westminster environs area. They felt the citizens of Westminster uphold good community morals and values. They noted the closeness of the community and the small town atmosphere, where everyone seemingly knows each other. They also cited the willingness

of the Commissioners and the general public to take care of the area and a readiness to hold public meetings and public hearings on issues concerning the community. The participants believed another strength of community involvement to be the fact that the County government seeks the input of the citizens. They have observed the Planning Department involving citizens in the plan development process, and citizens having the ability to personally reach County government officials with concerns and problems.

When noting the weaknesses of community involvement, the participants noted the apathetic attitude of many citizens and their lack of personal involvement and participation with the local governments. They believe the misconception that an individual citizen has little ability to make a difference in the local government is widespread.

***Interjurisdictional Coordination.*** The next topic the workshop participants reviewed for positive aspects was the subject of interjurisdictional coordination. They felt that strong leadership is present in the City government, and this helps to look after the needs of community members. They noted that the new Board of Commissioners should provide strong leadership for the next four years.

The participants also raised a number of weaknesses relating to interjurisdictional cooperation. They questioned who has authority or jurisdiction in cases where the City is placed against the County. They noted separate political jurisdictions and partisan politics within the County as hurdles to interjurisdictional coordination.

***Housing and Community Design.*** The participants briefly discussed the topic of housing and community design. They noted that the relative lack of income and affordable housing hinder the ability to attract industries and industry workers to the area.

## **D ⇔ Preferred Future**

The participants were asked to discuss how they visualized or preferred to see the Westminster environs community in the future. This visualization would be the community of the future if there were a shift in the current trends of development, business, and other areas of growth.

The participants said they would like to see growth centered on small towns, where sprawl is controlled and a rural environment between towns is maintained. They wished to see a revitalized downtown Westminster, complete with successful small business operations. They would like to see more clean industry be established in the Westminster environs area. They also would like to see more recreational activities and facilities for families, especially teenage and young adult family members. These recreational facilities could include more bicycle and pedestrian paths, hiking trails, and parks.

The participants hoped the Westminster of the future would have reduced traffic congestion and a public mass transportation system or mode of transport. The workshop participants in general hope that a fair, intelligent, equitable way to control growth and sprawl was found quickly.

## 2 Workshop #2

**A ⇨ Getting Down to Specifics on Issues**

The exercises of the second workshop were geared toward soliciting more detailed direction from participants on the major issues presented in the first workshop. The issues were grouped by the comprehensive plan chapter to which they pertained. Under each comprehensive topic was a short list of major issues that needed further clarification.

***Growth Management and Land Use.*** The three sub-issues presented were amount of future growth, location of future growth, and separation of residential uses from farmland. Participants' attitudes toward the amount of growth were primarily to limit or slow it down and to not outpace adequate public facilities. When it came to location of growth, the majority of the suggestions called for growth to be around the city and in the CPA area. However, a few participants did call for growth to be more spread out. Most of the answers concerning the separation of residential and farmland did call for some sort of separation between the two. Occasional comments either saw no need for any separation or called for an inter-mixing of residential and farmland.

***Transportation.*** The categories given under this issue were: need for bypass and need for transit. A variety of suggestions were given with regard to the bypass issue. Ideas ranged from a need for the bypass to not wanting a bypass, extending I-795 into Pennsylvania, and finding bypass alternatives. Responses regarding public transit generally were positive in nature, but split in concept. Some participants wanted connections to the Baltimore Metro, while others wanted to make the system strictly among local municipalities.

***Community Facilities.*** Despite being given a larger list of community facilities, participant comments only focused on issues surrounding schools, police, and parks and recreation. The most frequently mentioned issues regarding schools dealt with overcrowding, a desire for more local control, more accountability, and the need to keep schools small in size. Responses concerning police protection were varied, with several participants seeing a need for additional police while others thought that existing conditions were adequate. In general, participants pointed to a need for additional parks and recreational facilities. Facilities like Piney Run and Bear Branch were used as examples of what was needed for the area, along with a desire to see more parks near residential areas and a greater variety of facilities such as bicycle and pedestrian paths and facilities for a variety of sports activities.

***Natural Resources.*** The focus of this section centered on what development density should be permitted in the agricultural zone and the desire to create greenbelts around CPA's. Most of the comments that came in concerning development density in the agricultural zone indicated a desire for either no residential development or for very low-density development in those areas. The responses to the greenbelt issue were mixed, with several in favor and a few seeing no need for it.

***Economic Development.*** Participants were asked to think about this in terms of a need for additional industrial sites, permitted industrial uses, and the location of commercial uses. Those responding stated a desire for clean industry, white-collar jobs, clustering, and the use of existing sites. Participants' answers regarding permitted uses varied, with some participants wanting industrial uses only and others wanting to see a more business/commercial-friendly

atmosphere. According to participants, commercial growth should primarily be clustered (not spread out) and should be subject to infrastructure capacity and consumer demand.

***Historic, Cultural, and Archeological Resources.*** The level of historic preservation and the need for cultural resources were the issues for thought under this section. Comments on historical preservation predominantly were favorable, with a few respondents suggesting that it should be done within reason and with little taxpayer expense. Participants looked at the present and possible future when thinking about cultural assets. Those responding felt that current resources such as concerts, the Arts Council, Agricultural Center, Farm Museum, and Wine Festival needed to be supported while the creation of an arts center and the continued revitalization of significant structures should be sought into the future.

***Community Involvement.*** Participants commenting on issues surrounding community involvement mentioned a need for the local government to solicit more input from the citizens. Conversely, citizen disinterest was also mentioned as an issue. Volunteer organizations such as churches and fire departments were mentioned as opportunities for heightened community involvement.

***Interjurisdictional Coordination.*** Participants were asked to consider this in terms of the annexation of land into the City. Those commenting stated that annexation was fine as long as it was properly planned for and those citizens being affected agreed to it. Only one comment was voiced in opposition to further annexation.

***Housing and Community Design.*** The final topic of this workshop asked the participants to comment on aesthetic control on the MD 140 corridor and the provision of moderate-income housing. Concerning aesthetic control of MD 140, some answers stated that appearance was essential and suggested a reduction in billboards, increased tree planting, and limited access in the future. On the other hand, some participants thought that growth on MD 140 was too far out of control and it might be too late to implement anything effectively. Concerning housing issues, many of the comments were in favor of measures to promote moderate-income housing and a few remarks expressed a need for more housing variety.

## **B ⇨ A Closer Look at the Vision Statement**

As a portion of the Westminster Environs Community Workshop, participants were asked to evaluate segments of the vision statement that was previously drafted for the plan. They were to discuss what the segment of the vision statement meant to them in terms of what they wanted for the community in the future. These segments are shown below in bold along with a summary of the discussion.

***“The Westminster environs is a safe, clean community with a small-town flavor where residents know each other and share a sense of commitment to the community.”***

The participants took this portion to mean several things. Several persons felt this meant that they are living in a small-town atmosphere, where everyone seems to know everyone else. They noted the fact that they feel safe to leave their cars and houses unlocked without fear of theft. They felt that it is the citizens that help work toward this safe and clean environment; neighbors keep a watchful eye out for one another. The participants also observed that the people of the area take a certain pride in the appearance of their homes and property. They discussed the fact that the Westminster environs community has little crime, no litter, low

pollution, and the water and stream areas are clean, but they also felt that steps need to be established to help protect these positive aspects of the neighborhood. They would also like to see business and growth kept to a minimum to help preserve the small-town environment.

***“A balanced mix of land uses is concentrated around Westminster, thereby protecting community features significant to quality of life and heritage.”***

Most of the participants expressed a need for more conservation of agricultural land after reading this segment. They noted that a balanced mix of land means “residential, business, industrial, parks, and recreational” lands. They remarked that farmers are apprehensive about this future “mix”, that open space must be maintained. They would like to see high-density housing concentrated in designated areas. The participants would like to see more progressive planning take place in the future to create town centers and areas solely for housing, in order to preserve agricultural areas. They also would like to observe steps taken against suburban sprawl.

***“Industrial development provides a wide array of ample employment opportunities for the community’s residents and generates a strong tax base.”***

The workshop participants agreed that a wider variety of high, medium, and low-income jobs should be established. They noted that there are too few high tech and white-collar jobs available in the area. They would like to see the Commissioners take a more founded interest in attracting outside business to the area. They feel that an increased number of clean, high-tech industries, such as research parks or biotech firms, concentrated in specific locations should operate within the Westminster environs area. They expressed a preference for industrial centers rather than business sprawl in nonspecific locations.

***“Citizens are well served by appropriately located and diverse businesses.”***

The participants felt that more of an attempt to halt construction of strip developments of businesses should be made. They have observed business sprawl among the shops on Maryland MD 140, and would like to see more clustered businesses in the future. They would like to see more business campuses, architecturally attractive buildings established to house shopping areas. The diversity of the businesses should allow people to shop closer to home, rather than having to drive to surrounding areas such as Baltimore, Hanover, or Frederick for such services. They would like to see niche businesses protected from the larger chain operations.

***“A range of housing types is available for all income levels and interests.”***

The participants of the workshop stated that they feel the County should be concerned with developing more moderate and low-income housing. They noted that proper zoning to allow for higher density should occur, and the opportunity for creating mixed density subdivisions provided. They felt that sprawl is occurring too frequently and that too much farmland is being lost to development. They expressed a need for townhouses, apartments, and small houses. Overall, they cited a need to provide adequate housing for all incomes and all ages.

***“A safe, efficient, and congestion-free transportation system serves the Westminster environs community.”***

The workshop participants expressed a strong desire for some type of public

transportation to be established, particularly a mass transit system to get from Westminster to the Baltimore area. There were mixed responses from the participants regarding the bypass; some would like to see it constructed, others believed it will only cause more sprawl and congestion. The participants would also like to see more alternative routes provided between the CPA's. Many participants suggested a bus service within the environs area, and others declared a need for public transportation to the Metro in Owings Mills.

***“Public facilities and services meet the needs of the area’s residents and businesses.”***

The participants approved of the services provided in the environs area with the exception of transportation. They were dissatisfied with the direction that the Commissioners take in dealing with the concept of public facilities, which they felt are not working up to their potential. They expressed a satisfaction in limiting school size to less than 2000 students, a size which they felt adequately services the community. The participants wanted an emphasis to be placed on water conservation. They also would like to see infrastructure improvements made before they become overburdened by population. The participants also would like for the school board and the commissioners to keep pace with the need for new schools.

***“A network of parks, recreational facilities, and bicycle and pedestrian paths and trails provide for the population’s recreational needs.”***

The participants felt that larger scale parks along the lines of Bear Branch and the Farm Museum need to be established for the citizens of the environs area. In general, they felt that not enough recreational facilities exist in the community. They would like to see parks linked to greenways, sidewalks in residential areas, bike paths, and hiking trails. They also would like to see small parks within walking distances of housing developments. They identified a need for a pond for boating in the area. They noted that parks and recreational facilities contribute to a healthy community.

### 3      *Workshop 3*

The third workshop provided a summary of the results from Workshops 1 and 2 to those who had participated.

