



Maryland Department of Planning

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November 16, 2010

Ms. Monika Weierbach, Town Administrator
Town of Mount Airy
PO Box 50
Mount Airy, MD 21771

Re: Mount Airy Municipal Growth Element

Dear Ms. Weierbach:

Thank you for submitting the draft Mount Airy Municipal Growth Element (MGE) to the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) for our review.

The MGE references the 2004 Master Plan. MDP's comments reference the 2003 Master Plan since this is the last adopted plan we have on record for Mount Airy.

The Municipal Growth Element will provide a solid foundation for planning Mount Airy's future. It is important that individual plan elements be integrated with the other elements of the comprehensive plan. The MGE and the 2003 Master Plan would be stronger if the two were amended for clearer integration. The attached comments reflect a few comments related to the clarity and consistency between the MGE and the adopted Plan.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or Jenny King at 410.767.4500 should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Peter G. Conrad, AICP
Director of Local Government Assistance

Enclosures: MDP Comments on the Municipal Growth Element, MGE Checklist

cc: Steve Horn, Director, Carroll County Planning & Zoning
Eric Soter, Director, Frederick County Planning
Jenny King, Regional Planner
Rich Josephson, Director, Planning Services
Rita Elliott, MDP Clearinghouse
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**Maryland Department of Planning
Comments on the Mt. Airy Municipal Growth Element
November 16, 2010**

During the 2006 legislative session House Bill 1141 was passed requiring Counties and Municipalities address several new elements, one of which is the Municipal Growth Element (MGE) within their Comprehensive Plans. Under the provisions of this law, all new elements will need to be included in comprehensive plans by October 1, 2009 or if MDP approved a 6 or 12-month extension, April 1, 2010 or October 1, 2010, respectively.

Guidance documents for the MGE and the Water Resources Element are available at the Maryland Department of Planning website: <http://planning.maryland.gov>.

Municipal Growth Element

The Maryland Department of Planning appreciates the inclusion of current and estimated population projections and a discussion of the Town's development capacity. MDP has reviewed the Town of Mt. Airy's Draft Municipal Growth Element (MGE) and offers the following comments.

Population Projections

The MGE (page 4) states that the low growth scenario of 10,397 people by 2030 is the most probable pace of growth that the Town will experience. However, this population projection may be conservative and consideration should be given to increasing the population projections. The following comments explain this recommendation. Additionally, it is suggested that there be more detail on the historic growth trends of the Town and on household and population estimates which serve as the base for the projections in the Plan.

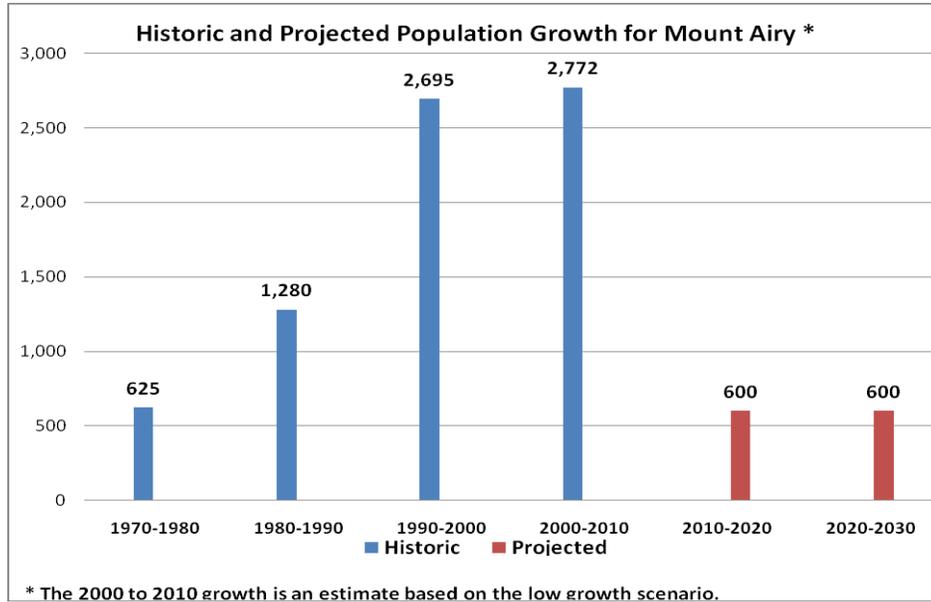
Mount Airy has experienced very rapid population and household growth in the past. There is a general discussion of these growth rates (expressed in percentage terms) for some past decades, but no actual data on population and households which would present a clearer picture of how the Town has grown over the last several decades. These numbers should be stated explicitly in either table or chart form. Perhaps the information from the 2003 Master Plan (pgs. 17-18) could be referenced in the MGE and be updated to reflect population trends that were not apparent in 2003.

It is not clear if the 3.0 persons per household figure, as illustrated on page 4, is the 2010 or 2030 growth figure. The person per household figure will likely change over time and should be treated as a dynamic figure when used to generate future population projections. Additionally how does the MGE person per household figure coincide with the 2003 Master Plan persons per household of 3.10 on page 18?

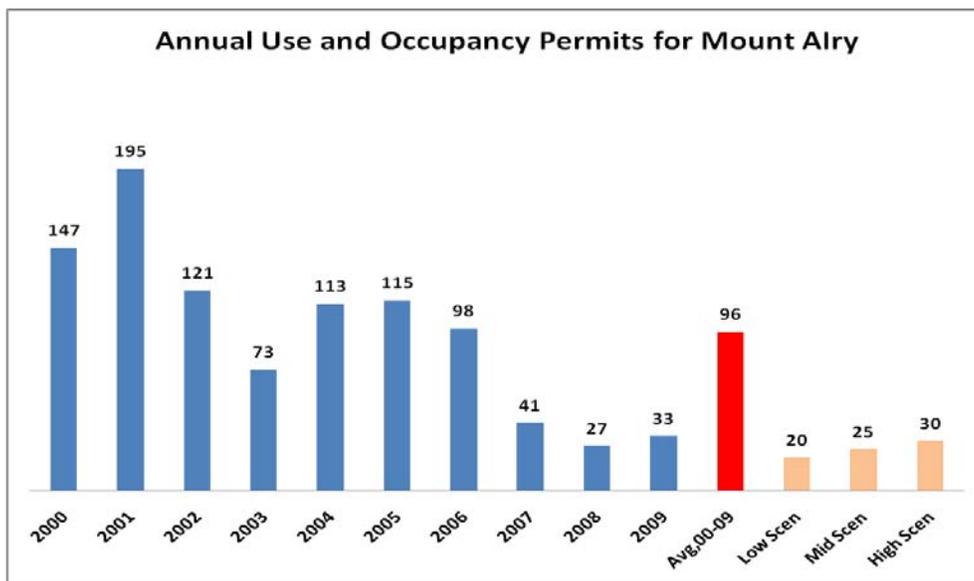
The MGE presents three scenarios for projected growth based on the number of new housing units permitted per year: low (20 units per year), middle (25 units per year) and high (30 units per year). These scenarios are then turned into total population projections by assuming three persons per housing unit on average for the new construction and then adding this to an estimated 2009 population estimate of 9,137. The 2009 population estimate is not specifically stated in the population projection table on page four, but can be calculated from the data available. It would be

better if this number were specifically stated, and just as importantly, how it was derived, i.e., what were the assumptions on the number of new units built (since 2000), and what is the overall occupancy rate and average household size of the Town in 2009.

The MGE (page 4) also states that, “The low growth scenario is the most likely pace of residential growth that will yield Mount Airy’s projected population.” From this statement, it is assumed that this is the preferred projection for the MGE and the basis for evaluation of facility and land requirements. The low scenario yields a total population of just under 10,400 or an increase of 1,200 between 2010 and 2030. This is a marked decrease from growth in the recent past, as shown in the graph below.



Additionally, the MGE (page 4) states that the scenarios were based on the “average number of building permits issued by the Town over the last 10 years.” The chart below compares use and occupancy permits with the three scenarios:



It is clear from the historical population growth trends for the Town, as well as the permit activity from the most recent decade (which included several years of the most difficult housing market in decades) that the projected growth used in the MGE represents a significant change from past trends. As stated in the MGE, in the past, “(m)any families have relocated to Mount Airy seeking a high quality of life and convenient commuting distance to Baltimore and Washington, D.C.” The Plan does not state any reasons as to why Mount Airy would not continue to be a desirable place to in which to live, and, therefore, the growth pressures that were evident in the recent past would not substantially dissipate over the next 20 years - as the low scenario implies. In fact page 22 of the 2003 Plan (Summary) notes that Mt. Airy will continue to experience development pressure.

For planning purposes, then, it would seem that, at a minimum, the high scenario may be the more plausible scenario, and even this scenario may be understating the growth pressures in the Mt. Airy area. Additionally, whatever housing unit scenario is chosen, more explicit assumptions should be made on how the overall household size (and the occupancy rate) for the Town will change over the next 20 years. It is this overall household size, applied to the occupied housing units, which will produce the projected total population.

Development Capacity Analysis

MDP appreciates the inclusion of a development capacity analysis in the MGE. According to the Plan, the Town’s expected build out is 381 residential units (after an expected zoning reduction of 229 units) or 1,143 people.

According to the Annexation Chart on page 6, 165 dwelling units have been proposed within annexation areas, at roughly 3 persons per household, equals an additional 495 people.

It is difficult to determine the link between population growth/projections and land supply/capacity for development. According to the MGE, the Town’s 2010 population is 9,197. According to the Plan’s development capacity analysis, 1,143 additional people can fit within the Town’s limits. It is unclear why additional annexations yielding an estimated 495 people have been considered since Mt. Airy can adequately handle future population demand within its municipal limits.

Please keep in mind that if Mt. Airy provides too much land for development, it will tend to be used inefficiently. In addition, plans and growth controls will be marginalized because there are an abundance of locational options for each new development.

The Town mentions that due to water and sewer shortages, future annexation areas could be designated as groundwater recharge sites. Is it appropriate to be re-zoning land as Employment (i.e.- Harrison Farm) and including land as Commercial (i.e.-84 Lumber Property) in such areas?

MDP recommends a discussion of a development time frame and maps that illustrate location of annexation site(s), land use, zoning, acreage and density information to better illustrate the Town’s annexation areas, associated land supply and population demand.

Community Facilities

The MGE must include a discussion of the impacts of growth, through not only infill development, but also through annexations, to public services and infrastructure supply. MDP recommends you refer to the Models and Guidelines #25, titled: “Writing the Municipal Growth Element to the Comprehensive Plan.”

The population figure used to determine impacts to public services and infrastructure was not apparent in the Plan. Is the 2030 population projection figure of 10,397 used or did the Town sum the estimated population found in the annexation areas (495) for a total population of 10,892? Clarification in a future revision of the MGE is recommended.

Financing Mechanisms

A required part of the Municipal Growth Element is to provide a detailed discussion on policies which will guide when and to what extent developers should absorb infrastructure expenses. For example, if a growth area is to be created because of extensive new development, should the developer(s) donate land for a school site or pay for the upgrade of a waste water treatment plant? Will excise taxes, impact fees or special taxing district be considered to help pay for finance growth and reduce its burden on local taxpayers?

Municipal Growth Element and its Relation to the Water Resources Element

The following comment is related to the consistency of the draft Mt. Airy MGE amendments with the adopted Carroll County Water Resources Element (WRE):

The Mt. Airy MGE forecasts the same amount of water and sewer demand as the Carroll County/Mt. Airy WRE (MGE, pp. 13-14, compared to WRE, pp. 202, 205) and notes that demand will decrease due to changes to Master Plan recommended zoning designations (MGE, pp. 3, 5). The Mt. Airy MGE explains that the Carroll County/Mt. Airy WRE includes water supply alternatives that will assist the Town in achieving build-out (MGE, p. 5).

General Comments

It is noted that the 2003 Plan contains the 8 Visions. These Visions were changed legislatively during the 2009 Legislative Session. Upon full update of the Master Plan the 12 Visions should be incorporated into the Plan. Additionally, there have been legislative changes to the Sensitive Areas requirements that should be incorporated into future iterations of the updated Master Plan.

Page 19 of the MGE notes that there will be a significant reduction of the future municipal growth boundary than the current adopted Plan. The MGE also discusses specific properties that may be suitable for annexation. How do these properties coincide with the 2003 Master Plan (pages 59-62)? How does Chapter 6, Community Facilities, in the 2003 Master Plan compliment the required public facilities in the MGE?