

2008 Smart Growth Listening Sessions

What We Learned from our Citizens

The Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) and the Task Force on the Future for Growth and Development in Maryland hosted a series of public forums throughout Maryland for residents to share their thoughts and ideas on future growth in the state.



These regional meetings, called Smart Growth Listening Sessions, were held at nine central locations in the fall of 2008. The purpose of the Listening Sessions is two-fold – to simply listen and obtain grassroots information that will guide and inform: 1) the Task Force in its statutory role as an advisory body to the Governor’s Smart Growth Subcabinet through 2010; and 2) MDP in its mission to promote “growth that fosters vibrant, livable communities, preserves and protects the environment, and makes efficient use of State resources.” MDP will further use this information in the creation of a State Development Plan and in crafting future public involvement.

Listening Session attendees were invited to microphones to speak directly to the chairman, Jon Laria, and members of the Task Force and MDP Secretary Richard E. Hall. While given four questions to frame the discussion, this open forum provided an opportunity for participants to voice their thoughts, opinions and feelings on the issues that are important to their communities. Comments made were written on a flip chart and captured as written notes by MDP staff.

2008 Smart Growth Listening Sessions

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During the nine Smart Growth Listening Sessions held from September through December 2008 across the state, The Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) and the Task Force on the Future for Growth took detailed notes on the comments and information shared by the citizens and organization representative who participated.

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The open forum format included the opportunity for participants to speak from the microphone in each venue (school auditorium, church hall, meeting halls, community center, etc.) From the pages of notes taken, a full summary of comments is included on the MDP website (insert link.) Additionally, we are sharing a brief summary (in no way an exhaustive list) of what we learned from the comments and information shared at each meeting.

Public Engagement

- While attendance in each meeting did not exceed 100, and was as few as 29 people, each meeting consistently furnished substantive and well informed comments.
- Speakers shared prepared (written) speeches, talked from note cards, and spoke extemporaneously. Regardless of which mode from which they spoke, citizens shared their personal concerns, issues of their communities, and their priorities. A smaller attendance in some venues did not compromise the quality of the discussion.
- Each meeting was well received by the participants, with several citizens expressing their appreciation that the Listening Sessions were being held. At each meeting, some participants expressed their disappointment that the meeting was not held in or closer to their particular community.
- In nearly every region, citizens and organization speakers shared the importance of the public having a role and being considered in plans for the growth and development of their communities. Speakers consistently shared concern that State government should consider the importance of localities managing comprehensive plans.

Statewide Planning

- Every region's residents addressed concerns for improved public transportation, affordable housing near ample public transportation, and employment growth specific to their particular region and environment, with local government having more resources to plan for job and community growth.
- Across the state, citizens expressed that a "one size fits all" approach to Smart Growth is not ideal for the state.
- Speakers in every region shared that the State Development Plan should involve citizen participation and take a "bottom up approach" in its creation. Residents don't want "outsiders" making decisions about their communities.

Regional Planning

- Agricultural protection is a high priority on both the Upper and Lower Eastern Shore.
- Residents in the Upper and Lower Shore area consistently indicated their preference for expanded growth away from the rural communities, and more toward urban centers both in the shore areas and away from the Eastern Shore.
- High density development should not be the ONLY Smart Growth option for the Eastern Shore.
- Employment growth on the Eastern Shore will prevent large numbers of residents having to commute to the Western Shore and Central Maryland for jobs and slow the out migration of the areas youth. This can help smart growth by conserving energy, toning down traffic congestion, increasing productivity on the Eastern Shore.
- Growth should be directed away from stream valleys and other sensitive areas.
- Southern Maryland groups expressed the importance of regional planning combining the county and municipal plans.
- The urban centers (Baltimore/Washington) should focus development inside the beltways.

Local Planning

- Urban communities need to emphasize more mass transit, mix use developments and historic preservation.
- Localities need to utilize existing infrastructures and replicate older town models.
- There are mixed opinions about increased density versus large lot developments for housing.
- In local communities, sprawl has resulted in new schools and not enough resources to sustain older schools.

Other Issues

- Maryland has to curb the pattern of sprawl, which is a major threat to agriculture across the state.
- Residents expressed concerns regarding the “costs” of smart growth (i.e. who will and how will we pay for it?)
- Regional Land Preservation Plans should respect the property rights of land owners, and particularly farmers.
- Citizens are concerned about how to protect the drinking water. We have to cooperate on water issues.