



RURAL DEVELOPMENT & RECREATION SUBCOMMITTEE Rural Economies Workgroup

March 9, 2018

Susan Summers, Chair
MD Sustainable Growth Commission
c/o MD Dept of Planning
301 W. Preston St, Suite 1101
Baltimore MD 21201

Dear Ms. Summers,

The Rural Development & Recreation Subcommittee, a subcommittee to the Rural Economies Workgroup established a mission to create specific recommendations with implementation strategies to improve rural reinvestment opportunities. Our focus over the last several months has been on finding implementation strategies for recommendation REG 1 of the Reinvest MD document, the focus of which is on improving regulatory review and business permitting processes. After thorough investigation we respectfully offer the following four recommendations for the Commission's consideration. We have found that these suggestions would have a positive impact on business processes throughout the state and not simply rural areas. We suggest that these recommendations get referred to the workgroup listed, so that appropriate consideration can be given to implementation, funding mechanisms, identification of responsible entities, accountability measures and possible pilot projects.

1) Improve an applicant's ability to track a project or permit through a multi-agency approval process.

Development projects of any size often require approvals from agencies at the municipal, county, state and sometimes federal level. Discussions with practitioners on the county level have led to a consistent theme, that though they can track a project on their level fairly easily, when it gets to another level, they lose the ability to clearly follow the progress of that project. The subcommittee recommends the **Reinvest MD Workgroup** investigate the creation of a digital tracking system, similar to the state clearinghouse, whereby all project reviewers are listed and have the ability to enter when they begin and end review. With such a system, either the applicant or any reviewer on any level can log in and see where the project is in the process and have access to contact information if a follow up is needed to move the project along.

2) Educate local jurisdictions on the benefits and lessons learned from Fast Track Permitting programs.

During the Reinvest MD process, discussions were had regarding the benefit of having an ombudsman usher important reinvestment projects through the review process – a person who can ensure that the project is flowing through all reviews as quickly as possible and ensure that all requirements are clearly understood and met in a timely fashion. Further discussion around this topic revealed that this concept is very similar to Fast Track Permitting, a concept already employed by a number of jurisdictions. This system is not always employed specifically for reinvestment projects, requires the establishment of criteria to identify qualifying projects, and often has been found to have both good and bad aspects.

The subcommittee recommends that the **Educational Workgroup** begin the process of collecting information from jurisdictions that employ such a system, the specifics of what they do, criteria established, and lessons learned, both positive and negative. Secondly, an appropriate way to disseminate such information to all Maryland jurisdictions would need to be discussed. We believe that while it is important to encourage and facilitate projects that foster infill, redevelopment and revitalization, we do not have enough information to definitively say that a Fast Track Permitting system is the most effective way to advance such projects.

3) Encourage the increased use of regional approvals.

A good example of improved efficiency came when the State Highway Administration moved the approval of entrance permits from their main offices to the regional offices. Based on that success, we wonder if perhaps other agencies would see a similar improvement in their processes by shifting some authority to approve permits to regional offices. Investigation revealed that two problems arise when considering such an action. (1) Many regional staff do not have the authority to make approvals. (2) Many regional offices have very little staff. The subcommittee recognizes that these two problems make this recommendation difficult to fulfill; however, we still believe there is value in evaluating processes to determine which take the most time and cause the most consternation on the part of the applicant and perhaps the reviewers. Once determined, those processes can be reviewed in light of whether they can be improved by shifting approval authority to the regional offices, whose staff is most likely to have the most familiarity with the project and players involved, as well as have the greatest ability to maintain effective lines of communication. We recommend the **Reinvest MD Workgroup** investigate this recommendation.

4) Create a library of educational materials concerning best practices for pre-application processes that allow for increased certainty and predictability in the development review and approval process.

Past research has revealed that developers feel as though the rules tend to change midstream during a project. Specifically, there has been a call for increased certainty and predictability from the start to the finish of a project. Though some aspects of every project are likely to remain unpredictable – the result of a zoning hearing and neighborhood opposition, as examples – it is possible to ensure that the procedure is clearly communicated to the developer and ensure that the procedure does not change. To that end, the subcommittee recommends that the **Educational Workgroup** gather national and local best practices for pre-application and application procedures that further greater transparency, certainty and predictability. Secondly, the Workgroup should create an effective mechanism to share that information to local jurisdictions.

Please note that the Rural Economies Workgroup reviewed the content of this letter and voted to endorse its content at its March 9th meeting. Thank you for your careful review and consideration of our recommendations. We look forward to continuing this valuable dialogue.

Sincerely,



Deborah Carpenter, Chair
Rural Development & Recreation Subcommittee