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Loudoun County, Virginia, Board of Supervisors deliberates housing growth

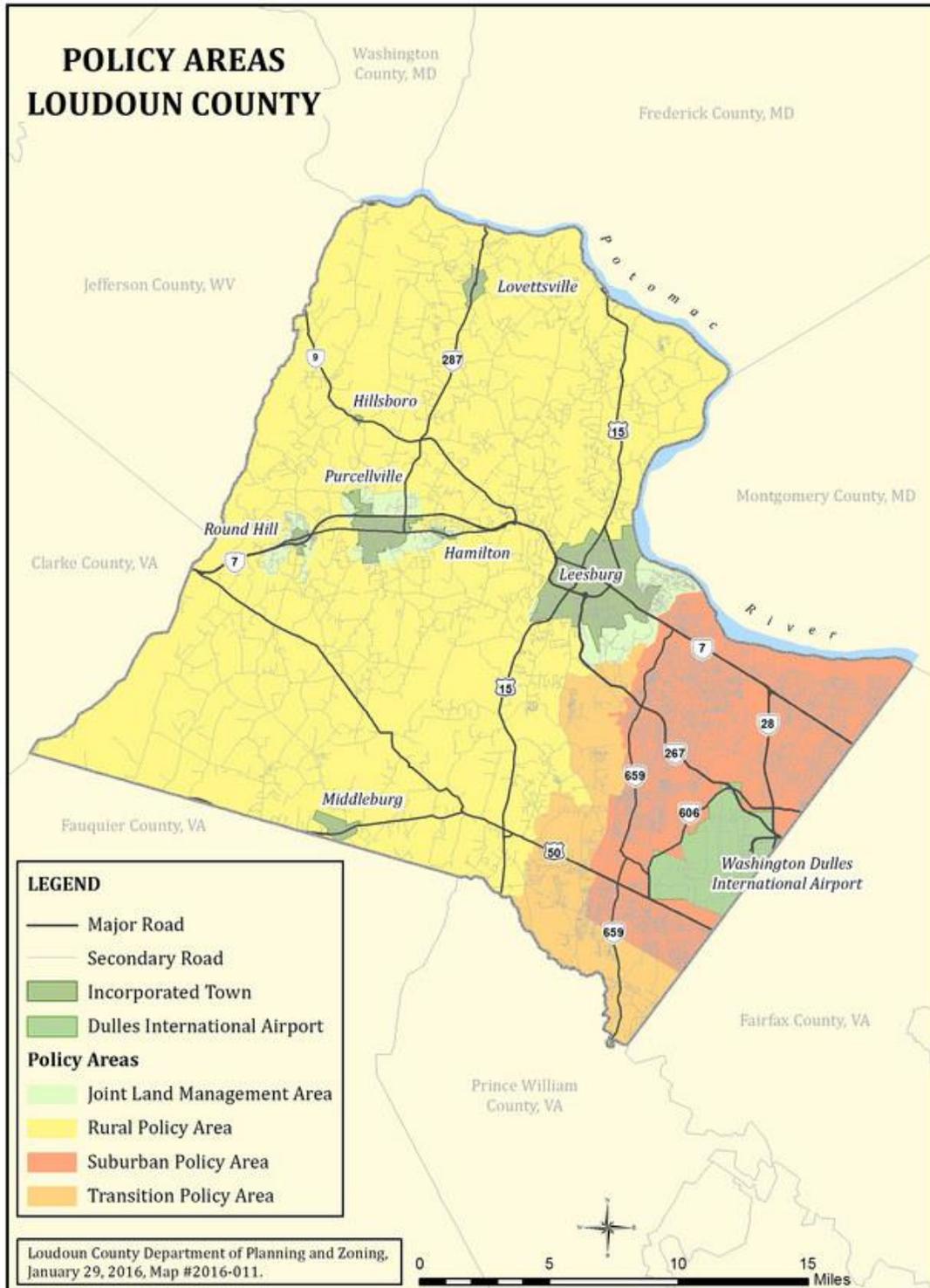
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Aerial view and map of Metrorail Silver Line extension under construction to Loudoun County, The County has been planning for residential and commercial development at the Loudoun Gateway and Ashburn stations. (The Dulles Airport station is being planned by the federal government.)

As discussed in our previous Update, the Loudoun County (Virginia) Board of Supervisors (“Board”) in June 2017 deferred a decision on its Planning Commission’s (PC’s) recommendations for substantial residential and commercial growth near the County’s future Metrorail (rapid transit) stations. Instead, the Board folded the planning process for those areas of eastern Loudoun County (“Silver Line Small Area Plan”) into the slower, County-wide Comprehensive Plan (CP) revision track (“Envision Loudoun”).



Loudoun’s residential development planning, especially near its Metrorail stations (Loudoun Gateway and Ashburn), which are scheduled to open by 2020, will have an important impact on housing costs and supply for Loudoun residents. They also will have a significant impact on people living elsewhere in the Washington, DC, region.

EHI has been providing input to the County on housing planning for more than two years. Its President, Tom Loftus, is a member of the County’s Housing Advisory Board (HAB).

County planners and Envision Loudoun Stakeholders Committee hold public workshops and submit preliminary housing plan recommendations

Loudoun County’s Dept. of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) conducted five public workshops in various parts of the County in June 2017, assisted by members of the Envision Loudoun Stakeholders Committee. An online public comment period continued until mid-July (“Round II public input”).

In August, DPZ issued an analysis of the 1,712 unique comments received during Round II. Many residents strongly support actions to meet the county’s tremendous housing needs, and that many others support restrictions on new development generally.¹ Those goals are in tension as regards increased residential development, which will be necessary to meet housing needs.

Housing White Paper

On September 8, the Envision Loudoun Stakeholders Committee issued a *Housing White Paper: Issues & Recommended Policies for Consideration*. It summarized the many public comments that urged that the County meet its housing needs. The White Paper discussed important priorities such as:

- Achieving jobs-housing balance, by permitting enough housing for those who work in the County at all income levels, and thus promoting the commercial growth the County seeks; and
- Overcoming the shortage of 11,200 rental units, identified by the 2017 Loudoun County Housing Needs Assessment commissioned by the County;

The White Paper also pointed out numerous, helpful strategies that are used in similar counties, but not in Loudoun, such as:

- Requirements for a higher percentage of affordable units (ADU’s) in certain new, residential developments than Loudoun seeks;
- Developer contributions to the County’s Housing Trust Fund;

¹ EHI’s informal review of DPZ’s tabulation of Round II public comments found, for example, that large and roughly equal numbers of residents emphasized concerns about excessive growth, on the one hand, and about making housing more affordable, on the other (about 85 comments each).

- Dedicated funding for affordable housing from the County budget
- More mixed-use zoning, to encourage more compact development and live-work-play communities;
- Community land trusts (CLT's), which produce affordable units on public land;
- Encouraging "Missing Middle" housing—units built with densities somewhere between single-family detached units and multi-family units; and
- Reduced parking requirements for new construction.

Board members express concerns

At the October 3 Board business meeting, representatives of DPZ and the Stakeholders Committee offered their respective preliminary scenarios for future land use types in the Suburban and Transition Policy Areas. Those areas are portions of eastern Loudoun County (see map above, p. 2). The Transition Area was created many years ago as a buffer zone between the more suburban east and the more rural west.

DPZ's preliminary scenario showed that there could be as many as 12,076 new residential units in the Transition Area within the next 20-25 years. Under the Stakeholders Committee's preliminary scenario, there could be as many as 18,323 new in that area by that time. By contrast, under the current Comprehensive Plan (adopted in 2001), there would be no more than 2,800 new units built there.

The potential increases in housing in the Transition Area drew questions from several Supervisors at the October 3 meeting.² They emphasized that most of the voters they hear from object to planning for new housing in such great amounts.

A major concern is the traffic impacts of new development on existing residents. Supervisor Kristen Umstattd (D-Leesburg) said, "if we were to go with the staff's recommendation of additional 12,000 units or even more so, the stakeholders' initial recommendation being 18,000 units, we don't have the roads or the bus system to accommodate that kind of growth."³

DPZ and the Stakeholders Committee are attempting to deal with the forecast in the County's recent Housing Needs Assessment of a net shortfall of more than 18,000 housing units in the County by 2040. (For more on that report, please click on [LOUDOUN HOUSING NEEDS SURVEYS 2017](#) .) DPZ and the County's Planning Commission had recommended permitting roughly 15,000 new housing units near the Metrorail stations, to absorb much of the housing demand that will be created by commercial development there. However, those recommendations were not accepted by the Board in June.

² Sydney Kashiwagi, *Supervisors push back against recommendation for more housing in transition policy area*, Loudoun Times, Oct. 5, 2017.

³ *Id.*

The Envision Loudoun process will involve many more steps, and it is scheduled to take at least one more year to complete.

Board holds Housing Summit

The Board held a Housing Summit on October 16. Representatives of approximately 20 private organizations spoke. Almost all of them favored much greater housing opportunity and affordability in the County. For example, Sharon Virts— founder of FCI Federal, a government contracting firm, and a member of the County’s Economic Development Advisory Commission (EDAC)—stated:

The Loudoun business community is struggling to attract and retain workers due in large part to the lack of attainable affordable [housing] options in the county . . . This coupled with the region’s transportation issues is having a significant impact on our business community. EDAC believes the county must take deliberate action to address the housing crisis we are facing.⁴

In addition, County staffers presented compelling data from the Housing Needs Assessment and other sources, concerning currently unmet housing needs, and tremendous future housing needs in the County. However, again there were significant questions from numerous Supervisors.

Supervisor Ron Meyer (R-Broad Run) was among the most vocal throughout the night. He urged the board to figure out where they would actually put the homes before taking any policy positions, and cautioned supervisors to not just be “all talk and no action” on the issue of affordable and workforce housing.⁵

Supervisor Tony Buffington (R-Blue Ridge District) said the public doesn’t support growth beyond current Board-approved levels. Supervisor Geary Higgins (R-Catoctin District) noted the potential \$100 million budget deficit for FY 2019 and said this is no time to take on affordable housing issues. The summit did not result in Board commitments to impact housing affordability in the County directly, although the Supervisors approved several relevant governmental initiatives.⁶

⁴ Sydney Kashiwagi, *Business leaders say affordable housing at a ‘crisis’ point in Loudoun County*, Loudoun Times, Oct. 18, 2017.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ The motions that passed directed the County staff to develop and return to a Board committee for review:

- A resolution of intent to amend the Zoning Ordinance to establish necessary revisions and newly created amendments to incentivize affordable housing;
- A public land inventory; and

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EHI hopes that supporters of housing growth and skeptical residents can come up with approaches that meet housing needs while satisfying the legitimate concerns of county residents about new development. If well-enough planned, the necessary growth might be achievable with general public support.

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- A formal revolving loan program for the Loudoun County Housing Trust Fund, with additional program details and schedule for implementation.

As to the motions that failed, one would have requested that the Envision Loudoun Stakeholders identify the best locations for added density, given access to public infrastructure and existing/planned community amenities. The other motions that failed would have directed the County staff to develop (and generally, return to a Board committee for review):

- An analysis of the possibility of establishing an affordable housing feasibility program to support soft costs associated with pursuit of affordable housing development funds, along with guidelines and criteria for possible return of funds; and
- Research on home ownership and rental programs where the County can leverage state, federal, and private programs, utilizing the County of Loudoun's Housing Trust Fund; and
- Recommendations to the Board to encourage additional affordable units, workforce units, and units for sale within the current and future residential re-zonings before the Board of Supervisors.