

## SUMMARY PLANNING'S SPEAKERS SERIES

### **A Tale from our Partners: Lessons Learned from the Trenches**

The County Planning Board invited planners from Oregon, St. Paul, Minnesota and nearby Arlington to discuss their experiences drafting and implementing zoning changes similar to those being proposed in Montgomery County. The presenters all shared the conviction that bringing a wider range of housing types into single-family neighborhoods will produce more diverse communities and create more equitable access to housing for people across the economic spectrum. Each speaker described the research work, public outreach and legislation that opened up neighborhoods previously zoned for single-family housing to multi-family housing types. Each presentation focused on zoning changes and policy initiatives directed at the private development market. The driving logic behind each of the three initiatives was simple: encourage smaller housing units and prices will be lower; allow higher density and more housing units will be built. All the panelists agreed that zoning changes alone will not solve either the housing shortage or the housing affordability crisis, and that in many cases, a satisfactory consequence of zoning changes would simply be housing that is somewhat more affordable than what the single-family housing market currently offers. The presentations and follow-up discussions were notable for their passion for zoning as an agent of cultural change, social justice and community transformation.

The speakers described zoning transformations in three locales unlike ours. Oregon has a state-wide system of planning, and has legislated planning goals that are promulgated by the state into communities; St. Paul and Arlington both have populations roughly a quarter of ours, and both have a more uniformly urban built environment. None of the presentations touched on 19-unit apartment buildings or extensive 'growth corridors' in existing single-family neighborhoods. But there were useful lessons to be learned.

Of the three presentations, the case study from St. Paul was probably most relevant to the work that Montgomery County is poised to take on, and the most inspiring example of a rigorous process. Their up-front studies (financial, technical and spatial) were impressive - our County Planners should aspire to nothing less. The planning team and their consultants looked at the consequences of proposed zoning changes in detail, from the micro-scale standpoints of marketability, affordability, and site/neighborhood fit. They tried to model the cost of various multi-family building permutations to see which would be most affordable; unsurprisingly, buildings with the most units in them have the least cost per unit. They found that larger rental structures were unlikely to deliver the returns expected by market rate developers in St. Paul, and concluded that rental units were most likely to be produced by individual property owners or small developers. They looked at different kinds of dense, large, closely-packed dwelling units in 3-d studies of neighborhood settings, and concluded they were "compatible" (assuming that something really big, 10' away from something else really big, represents compatibility). The planner illustrated some 'lessons learned' while trying to shoe-horn large structures - and the roads and utilities that feed them - into an existing neighborhood.

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Compromises and ad-hoc solutions were required. It was surprising to learn that the thorny challenges of water, power and sewer distribution as well as fire department access in tight spaces came to light only after the illustrative diagrams had been presented and the political victory had been won. The planning studies presented did not model the future look and feel or the road system of an entire densified community, nor did it tackle the macro-scale question: "how much housing can we expect this to create?". It's an experiment.

In Arlington they realized that very large houses were becoming the norm, and sought to turn that massiveness to advantage by allowing duplexes, triplexes, and quads of similar scale - something new in a now-familiar form. They documented a history of exclusionary zoning that had produced clear racial and economic segregation. Arguments about fairness and equity became central to Arlington's public debate about eliminating single family zoning. The presenter said the planning department "fed" helpful data to supporters in the public arena, and left opponents looking data-poor and merely impassioned. At the last minute, political leaders in Arlington decided to cap their zoning experiment at 58 multi-family housing permits per year for the first 5 years, and will evaluate possible further restraints when the current cap expires. Arlington requires on-site parking for multi-family units - .5 car per unit in areas close to transit, 1 car per unit elsewhere.

Both St. Paul and Arlington take a very light touch with regard to quality controls - in Arlington, the "public realm" will be supported by the requirement that one entrance door be on or near the primary street, utility screening is required, and there are de minimus requirements for street trees. Graphics shared by both presenters show how cars and site-filling buildings coexist in a densified world - close together, with a little bit of leftover ground surface for landscape.

In St. Paul and Arlington, the Herculean effort required to re-write zoning laws has yielded only a trickle of change in early days: St. Paul has issued 10 permits for multi-family housing in the first 9 months of the program, and Arlington's program has yielded permits for a net total of 112 new housing units in its first year (St. Paul's twin city, Minneapolis, population 3 million, has issued permits for 224 duplex and triplex housing units in the two years following their similar zoning re-write). Even allowing for market conditions depressed by post-pandemic recovery, inflation and high borrowing costs, the results are remarkably modest. Panelists suggested that this slow start - and the "piecemeal" future development that can be expected - justify benign neglect of questions about road, school and infrastructure capacity.

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Planning Board Chair Artie Harris concluded the presentations with an enthusiastic and moving pitch for Attainable Housing Strategies. He reminded the audience that there is no legislation written yet, and that neighbors are encouraged to attend listening sessions with Council members and Planning Director Sartori. He said he liked

Arlington's idea of a "trial period". He indicated, contrary to what's in the Attainable Housing Strategies text, that the 'Pattern Book' (which does not yet exist) shows that "all the parking will fit on the site" and not out on the streets. Maybe he misspoke, or maybe he realized that people are worried about parking and the vision needs to evolve.