



The Honorable Kriselda Valderrama
Chairwoman, House Economic Matters Committee
230 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: HB 243 – Land Use – Comprehensive and General Plans – Alteration of Elements

Dear Chairwoman Valderrama:

Under the guise of aligning local comprehensive plans with the state’s new “Planning Visions,” **HB 243 makes the local government comprehensive planning process more bloated and less useful than it is today.** The result will be municipalities spending more money that they don’t have, to produce information that they don’t need, and on matters they do not control.

Over the past decade, I have led comprehensive plans their subarea or elemental plans in Cumberland, Chesapeake City, Port Deposit, La Plata, Bryans Road, Prince Frederick, and Howard and Anne Arundel Counties among others. In some respects, I am arguing against my own professional and financial interest in **urging an unfavorable report on this bill**, but I believe we are at a time that when **less is more** when it comes to local government planning.

Unfortunately, HB 243:

- takes all the currently required “elements” of a local comprehensive plan and changes them to sub-elements, then adds in **new mandatory considerations and consultations.**
- requires state agencies to provide reams of data to municipalities which assuredly will not be used in a meaningful way to shape those plans.

Why does this matter?

- I have seen small towns of less than 1,000 people pay upwards of \$100,000 to consultants to prepare their comprehensive plans and cities of 20,000 people pay less than \$40,000. Why? Because the smallest of towns “fear” that something bad will happen if they don’t update their plan on the 5 or 10-year cycle, the larger and more sophisticated towns know better and/or have staff to do the work.
- Sadly, many of the towns must compete for grants through MDE, DNR or DHCD to pay for plan updates – grants that could be far better used to protect fix eroding shorelines, stabilize failing bridges, or rehabilitating houses in disrepair.
- Town planners have far better things to do with their time – including the processing of building and zoning permits to address Maryland’s housing shortage – than to be layering on

more information and considerations in furtherance of comprehensive plans that few will ever read.

What should this bill be doing?

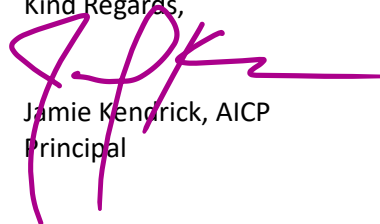
There may have been a time at the birth of the Smart Growth era when such robust comprehensive plans were useful and instructive to shape growth; today, many of the municipalities I work with are struggling to maintain their population, retain small businesses, and perform basic municipal operations in a cost-effective manner. Rather than loading more on their plate, a bill to reform the local comprehensive plan process should:

- Recognize that municipalities have different responsibilities and authorities than county governments.
- Encourage local governments, especially small municipalities, to scale their plans to the needs, goals and issues of that community.
- Limit new material to be prepared and instead rely on existing water/wastewater plans, local parks and recreation plans, inputs to the MDOT consolidated transportation program, sustainable communities' plans, and other required planning documents by reference into their comprehensive plan.
- Encourage counties and municipalities to work together in preparing and aligning their comprehensive plans and carrying out their planning and zoning processes.
- Encourage state agencies to provide a coordinated set of relevant and timely comments on local plans.
- Providing some incentive for local governments to complete/update their plans in a timely manner.

In the hearing on the Senate crossfile of this bill the Maryland Department of Planning continually referred to this being less prescriptive and more “guidance oriented.” It is interesting then that the use of the word “shall” is far more prevalent in this re-write than in the current law. It is also telling that (as of this writing) the Maryland Municipal League has apparently taken no position on the bill and that the Maryland Chapter of the American Planning Association – the local planning staff, consultants, and academics who do the work of preparing and implementing comprehensive plans were not engaged in developing the bill.

If as stated at the Senate crossfile hearing, MDP is intending to propose further reforms of the local comprehensive plan process with another bill in the 2027 session, I would encourage the General Assembly to hold off on this bill and have a singular effort.

Kind Regards,



Jamie Kendrick, AICP
Principal

