Chapter 5: Adoption of the Multi-Municipal Plan

Appendix 5A-1: Montgomery County Planning Commission
Public Participation Process

Source: Brian O'Leary, Section Chief, County Planning, Montgomery County Planning Commission.

In response to Acts 67 and 68 of 2000, the Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) initiated an update to the county comprehensive plan as required by the new provisions of the MPC. The plan is currently in development. The “kick-off letter” included a public outreach timeline and a survey of countywide and local concerns. Input from these groups was necessary to create a comprehensive vision for the county, and to prepare an effective plan to guide future development.

MCPC chose to conduct the process in three phases. The policy plan is the first phase and will create a vision for the future of the county. The individual plan elements, such as transportation, open space, public facilities, and housing, will be developed in the second phase. In the last phase, a land use plan will integrate policies and recommendations into a guide for growth. MCPC needed input from local officials, residents, and business owners, particularly during the policy plan phase. These steps were scheduled by the commission to generate interest and request input:

1. Initial Meetings to Explain Acts 67 and 68
2. Mailing of Kickoff Letter for Comprehensive Plan
3. Survey of Communities
4. Public Visioning Workshops
5. Public Review Workshops
6. Review of Goals and Vision by Municipalities
7. Formal Public Hearing and Adoption of the Policy Plan

The initial meetings were designed to briefly explain the changes to the MPC, describe current multi-municipal planning efforts in the county, and outline the steps MCPC would be taking in response to Acts 67 and 68, particularly the update to the comprehensive plan. The countywide survey and the series of workshops that followed were key opportunities for MCPC to communicate directly with the public. The survey included questions about the existing state of the county, the adequacy of public services, and what concerns should be the focus of future efforts to maintain and improve the quality of life in Montgomery County.

The survey was mailed to 5,500 recipients, and was available on the internet and at municipal buildings and libraries in the region. The survey could be completed by the general public, developers, non-
profits, and others in the community and region. Participants in this survey were asked to address their likes and dislikes, as related to such topics as shopping, employment opportunities, traffic, public transportation, housing, etc. The survey presented various community development issues facing the county and individual municipalities, such as sprawl, revitalization, preservation, recreation, and others. Participants were asked if these issues are currently being addressed and to indicate the priority each of these issues should have in achieving a vision for the future. In addition, the survey asked the community to rank open space needs, traffic congestion solutions, and economic development and housing policies. Finally, the survey asked if policy should guide new development, where growth should be directed, and if municipalities should plan alone, with neighboring municipalities, or with the county. The MCPC received 1,759 responses that were used to develop an outline for the policy or vision plan.

The first series of public visioning workshops were designed to advance and support the initial interest generated by the survey of communities. Over 157 people attended the seven spring workshops. Presentations about the county were made and breakout sessions provided an opportunity for residents and other members of the community to elaborate on their issues and define goals for the county. The attendees participated in two exercises: a money allocation exercise and a development exercise in which wooden blocks were spread on a map. The exercises were enthusiastically received and the results of the visioning workshops were used as a guide to prioritize concerns and further develop the vision plan.

The public review workshops that followed the visioning phase provided an opportunity to review the goals and objectives of the draft policy plan. These nine fall workshops were attended by 167 participants. Breakout sessions of smaller groups were formed to conduct review exercises and generate response to the plan. Participants filled out worksheets about regional planning, preservation, and transportation, and then discussed their answers. Finally, the participants compared a sprawl map to the vision plan. Feedback from these workshops was very positive. In addition to input from the workshops, each municipality was sent a copy of the draft vision plan for comments. MCPC staff met with individual municipalities as needed.

As a result of the comments and issues raised at the workshops, the vision plan was amended. One of the most significant changes was the creation of a separate section for water resources, which emerged as a major concern. The revised plan was sent to the MCPC board for comment, and was subsequently revised again. This version is currently in graphic production. It will be reviewed by the commissioners and mailed to the municipalities for comment.

MCPC expects the vision plan to be adopted next year. They hope to secure as much municipal agreement as possible, and some communities have expressed interest in the possibility of adopting the county comprehensive plan as a multi-municipal plan.