

OPINIONS & VIEWS

THE FEDERATION CORNER



On Rural Neighborhood Clusters:

One Size Fits All Approach Doesn't Work

The Sentinel Newspapers have offered the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) www.montgomerycivic.org an opportunity to present the issues and opinions of affiliated community organizations. The viewpoints expressed may not necessarily be those adopted by the Federation. Any resident who would like to contribute to or respond to this column should contact Federation Delegate Alyce Ortuza at 301-774-6617.

A Letter to the County Council

Steve Silverman, President of Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave., Rockville, MD 20850

Dear President Silverman:

The Upper Rock Creek community was asked to express their concerns regarding the Rural Neighborhood Cluster (RNC) zone that is being recommended for the large undeveloped properties in the Upper Rock Creek master plan. Up to this point, RNC zoning has only been applied to properties in Sandy Spring/Ashton and Potomac, and it has only been developed in Sandy Spring/Ashton.

In order to understand the issues from as broad a range of perspectives as possible, we collected input from three groups of people: members of the Upper Rock Creek and the Olney Coalitions; residents of Sandy Spring/Ashton; and planning professionals, including Planning Board and council staff members. More than 30 people shared their observations with us. This is what they had to say.

- Despite good intentions, Rural Neighborhood Cluster (RNC) has not preserved the rural character of Sandy Spring/Ashton.

- RNC has preserved significant tracts of contiguous Open Space. This land is protected from future development by easements that are controlled by Greater Sandy Spring Green Space, Inc.

- RNC has protected rural vistas along the Rural Legacy Trail, but not the rural vistas that characterize the country roads people use every day. What people see today are huge houses on small lots – “a wall of vinyl.”

- Visual buffers are especially important with RNC because the zone introduces suburban development patterns in rural areas. These patterns do not fit with their surroundings, so people want to hide them from view.

- A densely packed cluster of nearly identical luxury homes on very small lots does not meet the requirement for a diversity of lot sizes under the optional method or the community's desire for a variety of architectural designs and house sizes.

- RNC opens the sewer envelope and significantly increases the density of development. For example, if Dellabrooke were developed on well and septic it would have yielded 21 units. Rezoned RNC it yielded 48. From the community's point of view this is a huge difference.

- When hot real estate markets, clustered development and rural infrastructure collide, the result is a mess. The pace of build-out accelerates and quickly overwhelms infrastructure capacity leading to lower levels of service for everyone. Residents notice this and they are angry.

If the county is going to apply the RNC zone in master plan areas other than the one for which it was designed, there has to be some thought given to how to make this work.

Nothing in the intent statement for the zone addresses the protection of water quality or sensitive natural resources. Properties proposed for RNC zoning in the Upper Rock Creek and the Olney master plans have significant environmental issues. The protection of water quality is particularly critical for properties in the Upper Rock Creek watershed.

The community believes it is very important that the Planning Board goes back and takes a look at the RNC zone from this point of view before applying it to these properties. Perhaps there needs to be a separate optional method for environmentally sensitive properties where the intent of the zone is to preserve water quality versus preserving rural vistas along the Rural Legacy Trail.

We welcome the opportunity to work with Planning Board staff to strengthen the RNC zone so that it will work effectively in all the areas where it is applied.

Respectfully,
Susan Petrocci, *Upper Rock Creek Coalition*

Nancy Wendt, *Olney Coalition*

“When hot real estate markets, clustered development and rural infrastructure collide, the result is a mess.”

SUSAN PETROCCI
Upper Rock Creek Coalition

NANCY WENDT
Olney Coalition

Issue Background

The RNC zone was created during the development of the 1998 Sandy Spring Ashton master plan. The zone was initially drafted to accomplish three things.

1. Preserve the rural character of Sandy Spring / Ashton.
2. Create large, contiguous tracts of open space at the periphery of new developments.
3. Protect unique aspects of the area's cultural heritage including the Sandy Spring and the Rural Legacy Trail.

Infrastructure

When hot real estate markets, clustered development and rural infrastructure collide, the result is a mess. The pace of build-out accelerates and quickly overwhelms infrastructure capacity. Residents notice this and they are angry.

Instead of gradually increasing demands on roads, schools and emergency services, clustered development pro-

duces explosive growth. There is no time to catch up where infrastructure is already behind and the hole gets deeper very fast. The consequence is rapidly degrading levels of services for everyone.

Now that Policy Area Reviews have been removed from the Annual Growth Policy and moratorium areas will shortly be free to develop, the combined effects of denser development patterns and lagging infrastructure capacity need to be addressed in master plans especially where the RNC zone will govern most new development.

Environment

The RNC zone was not created specifically to protect the environment. As a result, there are no standards or guidelines in the current text to address water quality, air quality, wetlands, endangered plants or wildlife. Protection of these elements of the environment begins with an accurate baseline, an inventory of the resources to be protected, together with an assessment of their current state. Critical thresholds need to be defined and performance measures need to be established. Then the impact development has on natural resources needs to be monitored so that any degradation can be identified in time to take corrective action before it becomes irreversible.

Generally, clustered development is environmentally beneficial because road and sidewalk surfaces are reduced, houses can be clustered away from streams, forests and wetlands, and sensitive areas can be set aside in open space. However, if clustering requires sewer lines to be extended in or across sensitive streams, the net effect may be more detrimental than beneficial. Or, if clustered development results in significantly higher densities than what could be achieved on well and septic, total imperviousness for a site may actually be greater with clustering.

Clustered development can be environmentally beneficial. It all depends on good site layout, environmentally sensitive design and an appropriate definition of open space.

True open space is green space or undisturbed areas of native vegetative cover that remain so. Areas such as athletic fields even though “open” have compacted soils that do not serve the same ground water recharge function as green open space. Further achieving truly green design may require an arrangement of open space that is different than the arrangement prescribed in the existing ordinance.

Lessons Learned

Clustered development alone does not guarantee environmental protection. One approach would be to create an environmental option under the RNC zone with guidelines that differ from those set up to protect rural character.

Perhaps we should also look at green design concepts and LEED certification. The LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Green Building Rating System™ is a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings. Members of the U.S. Green Building Council representing all segments of the building industry developed LEED and continue to contribute to its evolution.

Correction

The correct number of the County Council Fire Bill referred to in last week's column is Bill 36-03. The bill, which was authored by Councilman Mike Knapp, could, if enacted, eliminate volunteer fire fighters throughout the county,