



HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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November 17, 2021

Councilmember Liz Walsh, Chair
Howard County Council, District 1
3430 Court House Drive
Ellicott City, MD 21043

Dear Chairperson Walsh,

As you are aware, one of the most important executive functions held by any Administration is to oversee the development of a General Plan update at the appropriate time. Conducted roughly once every decade since 1960, the General Plan establishes clear, long-range policies for the County's future growth and conservation. It considers how and where the County should grow as it adjusts to evolving economic, environmental, and social conditions over the next 20 years. The Plan informs many of Howard County's subsequent decisions on land use, transportation, open space, agriculture, community facilities, community character, historic preservation, housing, economic development, and quality of life, and is updated approximately every ten years to reflect the values and address the needs of the County's changing population.

The process of developing a General Plan update is a matter of great public interest, requiring significant bandwidth and attention from both our Administration and the County Council as critical policy issues are considered. As has been historically required with a task of this importance, we have been hard at work crafting the next update to the General Plan - *HoCo By Design*. We have extensively engaged our community in this shared process, distributing over 81,000 fliers, hosting 78 community meetings and leading 28 focus groups since the spring of 2020. Despite the challenges of performing community outreach through a pandemic, there has been a high level of public engagement to date, with over 8,400 comments received, over 2,400 attendees at virtual events and nearly 1,200 responses to surveys conducted over the past seventeen (17) months.

While there has been significant effort to develop the *HoCo By Design* draft Plan and substantial interest and engagement from our community, we have deep concerns about the County Council's capacity to meaningfully engage in this critically important process while balancing competing priorities and duties over the next year. The last update to the General Plan, *PlanHoward 2030*, required the previous County Council to dedicate eight (8) Work Sessions over two months to deliberate on the Plan in a continuous and efficient manner. Given the overwhelming level of public engagement in this process to date, the current Council may need as many, or more, Work Sessions to give *HoCo By Design* sufficient consideration.



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Our concerns were heightened by remarks made by many Councilmembers at the Council's Monthly Meeting held on November 3, 2021. Council Chair Walsh remarked broadly about the current Council workload at 2:44:15 that "I just have real concerns about the pace and the volume that we take on and any pretense we are giving the attention it deserves, and that we are allowing the public the availability to give the attention that each of these bills deserve on the schedule that we have customarily agreed to."

Councilmember Jung remarked at 2:54:44 that "We are going to need hearings on the General Plan, both from the public and time for the County Council to review the General Plan. I don't know if we want to put something on the calendar for that, but all the more reason why we have to do something this coming year. There's just no way that we can do Zoning Board, General Plan, redistricting, legislative sessions and everything else. We just don't have the bandwidth to do all that." Continuing at 2:58:37, Councilmember Jung stated that "We've had charter review, we've had a number of large items that we have had to address during our short time on the County Council and now we've got the General Plan. So there have been a lot of sort of, extra items that have created even more time constraints I think for all of us."

Councilmember Yungmann added at 2:54:26 that "I'm not sure I'm an advocate for telling the Administration that they have an allowance or us not introducing things, but come on. You're telling us you want us to get through the General Plan by a certain period of time, you need to hold back some of that stuff."

Further complicating the ability to meaningfully engage in this highly impactful decision-making process are the presence of primary and general elections being held in June and November of next year, respectively. Prior County Councils have been concerned about the potential politicization of critical land-use and zoning policy decisions during an election cycle, evidenced by Howard County Code § 16.211, which prohibits the Council from taking final action on zoning applications between the date of the primary election and the point at which newly elected Councilmembers have qualified and taken office.

A General Plan update deserves thoughtful consideration by the County Council as noted by the concerns expressed at the November 3rd Monthly Meeting. We can all agree that it is not in the best interests of our County, our community, or this inclusive and deliberate process to submit this Plan to the Council for consideration when its members have concerns about the available bandwidth and attention needed to adequately vet the policies and objectives contained therein. It is far more important to us to get this General Plan right than it is to deliver it right now.



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Given the importance of the policy considerations contained within a General Plan update, the limited bandwidth of the County Council to consider this legislation while balancing other critical and time sensitive duties, and acknowledgement that zoning recommendations in the General Plan should be held to the same standards as other zoning matters, we have decided to extend the Plan's development until after newly elected Councilmembers have qualified and taken office as outlined in Howard County Code § 16.211. This decision will also allow us to use the coming months to incorporate the substantial community feedback received into the Plan, engage the public in additional in-person dialogue as COVID cases continue to decline after the holiday season and beyond, and refine draft policies to ensure they reflect our community's interests.

As always, thank you for your continued partnership.

All my Best,

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive

Cc: Opel Jones, County Council Vice Chair
Deb Jung, County Councilmember
Christiana Mercer Rigby, County Councilmember
David Yungmann, County Councilmember have
Michelle Harrod, Council Administrator