

COG Plan Envisions Future of Regional Development

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The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments has drawn up a plan for local officials to sign on to, but some of those officials are skeptical.

The plan, called Region Forward, was drawn up by the council's Greater Washington 2050 Coalition, which seeks to shape a "more prosperous and livable region over the next half-century."

David J. Robertson, executive director of the council, said the plan is not a "one-size-fits-all" document, but one that recognizes that the 21 participating local governments in Northern Virginia and Maryland, along with the District of Columbia, will have different land use, transportation, growth, housing, public health, air quality and planning needs over the next 40 years.

Robertson said the plan wouldn't supercede local jurisdictions' authority, but would simply serve as a guideline for governing bodies when they are making decisions.

"This in no way trumps or usurps the authority that your community has for land use or transportation," Robertson said of the plan that supports walkable, mixed-use developments and more green development.

"What we are trying to do is provide a regional context for the decisions this board makes on a regular basis," Robertson recently told the Manassas City Council.

Manassas City Councilman Jonathan L. Way is one of the skeptics.

He said that going green could be bad for the local economy and that the plan's goals for reducing green house gases in the region by 20 percent below 2005 levels by 2020, and by 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050, exceed targets set out by other organizations around the world.

"The cost consequences could easily drive the big guys off to Singapore. I assume we would not be supporting things which would pressure them to do something like that," Way said.

Additionally, Way said he didn't want to see subsidies to jurisdictions that couldn't afford to implement some of the plan's goals on their own.

Way also said that future studies involved in measuring whether jurisdictions are meeting the plan's goals will cost too much and over burden already thinly staffed local governments.

"I'm not sure that we have the resources to be able to participate to the extent envisioned in that document," Way said.

The plan also calls for Regional Activity Centers that consider future use of mixed housing, work centers, transit and cultural activities.

Manassas City Councilman Mark Wolfe said he didn't agree with the activity centers after reading the document outlining the council's plan.

"I'm not sure I want to be a Regional Activity Center anymore because there are targets with regard to affordable housing. I'm sorry. I don't want any more affordable housing as it is defined now," Wolfe said.

Robertson once again assured the council members that the city council alone would be in charge of how Manassas develops in the future and that city council members could apply the plan as they see fit.

"Your hands are on the steering wheel, the gas pedal and the brake. You're going to determine what of this document is applicable to your community and which is not," Robertson said.

The document was simply something to strive toward, Robertson said.

"I think there was a recognition that we wanted something that was a bit more of an aspirational document," he said.

Wolfe was not satisfied and said he thought the plan was overreaching in its goals.

"I am an elected Republican and have to tell you I think you have gone several steps too far in this document," Wolfe said. "You don't write targets, goals and objectives unless at some point in time there is going to be some mechanism to measure an enforcement policy. I cannot stand for that."

Wolfe said he could envision a time under the plan when local jurisdictions would lose autonomy.

"Philosophically I think we are setting ourselves up to go down a road where we might as well have a regional government with headquarters in Fairfax or somewhere, and we will be forced to mandates which will be detrimental to the City of Manassas," Wolfe said.

Prince William County, Prince Georges County, the City of Manassas, the Town of Bladensburg, Md., and the District of Columbia have yet to adopt the coalition's plan.

Bladensburg has a vote scheduled for June 14 and the Prince William Board of County Supervisors has a vote on the matter scheduled for Jun 1. The City of Manassas has not yet scheduled a vote, Robertson said.