

Study: Frederick workforce to see 42.5 percent jump

20-year vision warns of lack of housing

Originally published December 10, 2011

By Pete McCarthy

Workers prepare a construction site for the installation of floor joists in Brunswick Crossing on Friday morning.

Live where you work and commutes can be shortened, congestion eased and a stronger community formed, some experts believe.

A recent study by the George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis concluded that, without better cooperation and a regional housing plan, the future of the Washington region's economy could be threatened.

"Those that are trying to attract employers have as their mission to attract jobs," Lisa Sturtevant, an assistant research professor at George Mason and co-author of the report, said this week. "We want them to stop and think. If they want jobs, they should seek the right kind of housing. We want to get people to start thinking about housing as an economic strategy as well."

The report projects Frederick County will see its workforce grow by 42.5 percent, or 41,950 jobs over the next 20 years. To provide enough housing for the new workers, the county would need to build 27,336 more houses, townhouses or apartments, according to the report.

By contrast, neighboring Montgomery County's projected boom on the job front could require up to 100,000 additional homes, according to the report.

Previous growth has contributed to gridlock. Without change, it will only get worse, according to Sturtevant.

"If we are going to grow our economy, we cannot count on importing labor to the same extent that we have been," Sturtevant said. "Our transportation infrastructure can't handle it. The solution then is that we need to think about how to house more of our workers in our region."

Not going to dictate change

Those who handle planning in the county questioned the method for coming up with some of the numbers.

Housing growth in Frederick County has been under scrutiny in the past year. When the 2010 Comprehensive Plan was created to set goals for growth in the county, it called for slowing down some construction to keep the county's rural feel.

Frederick County Planning Manager Jim Gugel said the job growth number in the George Mason study is higher than what the county predicted -- using U.S. Census Bureau figures from 2005, the comprehensive plan projects 24,845 new jobs -- but the number for housing construction is pretty close.

"You keep it in the back of your head and put it on the shelf," Gugel said of the report. "It is not something that is going to dictate any change in policy or plan on our end."

Gugel said he views the research as more of a discussion starter.

Steve Seawright, president of the Frederick County Building Industry Association and president of the Maryland Builders Association, said he sees the projections as proof that Frederick County needs to stay actively involved in construction.

The county must also recognize how easily circumstances can improve five or 10 years from now.

Seawright said the report "certainly is consistent to the growth periods that Frederick County has had in the past."

'Living in your community'

By not attracting workers to live nearby, communities lose out on a critical source of revenue, Sturtevant said.

"They are taking their paycheck home and spending it somewhere else and supporting another location," she said. "You need to keep people living in your community."

The projected job growth spurt in Montgomery County could be to Frederick's advantage.

"Because Frederick County is so close to Montgomery, some will go to Frederick," Sturtevant said. "There are always going to be people who want to live in more rural residential neighborhoods. It's a natural progression."

Some might argue that will only crowd schools, but there is a definite benefit, Sturtevant said.

"It means folks are spending their money in your local economy, they are supporting local jobs, they are paying property taxes," she said. "That's the other side of the story that doesn't get told as often, and that's about housing workers."

Opponents of changes to Frederick County's 2010 plan say the George Mason report echoes their claims.

The county is now reviewing zoning changes made by the previous administration. A total of 193 rezoning applications are under review, which could pave the way for as many as 17,000 additional houses, townhouses or apartments in the county. That number would be in addition to the nearly 36,000 new dwellings called for over the 20 years in the comprehensive plan.

"It says that the 2010 Comprehensive Plan is dead on," Friends of Frederick County Executive Director Janice Wiles said of the report. "The market is going to drive all of this, but it's not necessary to rezone land when we already have met projections with the land that we have."

Friends of Frederick County and other groups joined together last month to file a lawsuit that calls the zoning review unlawful. They are trying to block county officials from changing the comprehensive land-use plan.

Frederick County Commissioner David Gray has also opposed veering away from the 2010 plan's findings.

The county should be focused on assuring major roads are adequate for growth, he said.

Losing focus, Gray said, could lead to headaches for the future workforce.

"If we end up clogging ourselves, it won't be a better commute," Gray said. "If you end up building more houses, you're going to have more jobs. I don't think people will look at it as desirable if it's gridlock."

Please send comments to webmaster or contact us at 301-662-1177.

Copyright 1997-12 Randall Family, LLC. All rights reserved. Do not duplicate or redistribute in any form.

The Frederick News-Post Privacy Policy. Use of this site indicates your agreement to our Terms of Service.