

## **Endangered: Prince George's Legacy of Ecological Stewardship**

The Patuxent River is a prime asset of Prince George's County, because of its beauty, its widely diverse plant and animal life, and its contribution of clean water to the Chesapeake Bay so that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the "pleasant living" -and the crabs and oysters- of the Bay. The Patuxent is often called 'Maryland's River,' because it is the only river in Maryland whose source and mouth lie entirely within state borders.

Prince George's County has an outstanding record of leadership in protecting the Patuxent, having gone well beyond the minimal requirements of the state's 1984 Critical Area Law, which offers some protection from nearby development for tidal rivers and the bay. Prince George's has made wise use of its 'rural legacy' funds, provided by the State of Maryland, to purchase land along the river; more than 9,000 acres are now public preserves. The 'rural tier' concept in the county's new general plan, which aims to preserve the remaining open spaces in the eastern and southern parts, also shows a commitment to balancing ecological preservation and economic development.

Regrettably, new legislation pertaining to the "critical area" along tidal rivers represents a retreat to the minimal preservation requirements of the state. The legislation, which goes before the county council for a vote on Tuesday, contains minor changes to consolidate regulations and to update text about storm-water regulations, disabled people's access and buffers. But it also contains provisions that will open the door to residential development and mining operations along the shores of the county's three rivers.

The source for the legislation is County Executive Wayne Curry, who has long supported residential building along undeveloped stretches of county shoreline. In a December workshop he directed county employees to develop design schemes for waterfront building along the Patuxent. He has created a special unit within the county's Department of Environmental Resources to draft revisions of land use regulations in order to accomplish his goal.

The council, in its turn, has devoted insufficient attention to the provisions of this legislation, which could have long-term negative effects on the watersheds. It was not involved in the 2001 review of the county's "critical area" program nor has it studied the legislation in committee. They conducted a reading of the legislation and a preliminary vote all in a single session on April 30. It did not even take the time to consider detailed feedback from the Maryland National Capitol Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC).

However, a citizens' group concerned about the environment has taken the time to study the proposed legislation carefully and has been concerned by what it has found. The legislation will enable new development to be located in conservation zones along the Potomac, the Anacostia and the Patuxent rivers. If passed, the legislation will allow sprawling riverside housing developments to be carved out of what is now continuous forest and farmland. The "conservation agreement", a binding commitment holding developers to their conservation plans, will be eliminated. An alarming number of exemptions to sub-division review processes are allowed. Even surface mining and wet processing of gravel would be permitted within 300 feet of the river's edge.

In addition, the most disturbing discovery is that this "lame duck" council in its final days is applying a "rubber stamp" to pro-development legislation and building applications. This means an abandonment of the principles of ecological stewardship forged in this county over the past fifteen years. They seem unwilling to stem the tide of development that is sweeping through the county until it finally reaches the very banks of the Patuxent. Before conducting a hasty and ill-considered vote on Tuesday, this council should weigh the real cost of development and the risk that the county's irreplaceable assets will be forever squandered.

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