

**December 2017**

**HPRC Issue Brief**

## **The Health Benefits of Zoning: Observations from Prince George's County's Zoning Rewrite**

### **Health Challenges and Disparities in Prince George's County**

For the first time in about a half century, Prince George's County (Maryland) is close to completing a multi-year process to rewrite its Zoning Ordinance, the set of regulations that determines land use, where buildings are located (or not, such as in wildlife preserves), and how the built environment (buildings, sidewalks, roads, parks) impacts daily life.

The County is especially well-suited for a health-oriented approach to zoning. Despite its unique demographic status as the wealthiest predominantly African American county in the United States, Prince George's County still faces serious health challenges. The health profile below shows key aspects of these health challenges, many of which can be meaningfully abated through healthy zoning.

#### **Prince George's County Health Profile**

- There are 1,837 residents for every primary care physician (PCP) in the county. In Maryland, the ratio of PCP to resident is 1,153:1. Nationally, the ratio is 1,067:1.
- Two-thirds of adult residents are overweight or obese.
- Heart disease is the #1 cause of death and disability in the county, followed by cancer.
- More than 60% of the deaths in the County are due to chronic disease such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.
- Between 2009 and 2013, the death rate due to cancer was 172.7 per 100,000 compared to 147.4 in Maryland.
- Prince George's County residents die from diabetes at much higher rates compared to State residents overall (28 vs 19 deaths per 100,000 respectively).
- The asthma Emergency Department visit rate was approximately 4.9 times higher among Black residents compared to White residents.<sup>1</sup>

The County's chronic disease burden signals the need for intentional health disparities intervention, including policy efforts to promote a healthier built environment. The County's Zoning Rewrite<sup>2</sup> that began a few years ago, and is now nearing completion, signals the County's intent to take positive steps toward creating a healthier built environment for Prince George's County residents. In response to the County's call for public comment, HPRC observed that the draft could be strengthened by incorporating some suggested practices. Below we summarize the potential for improved health outcomes and the health equity opportunity declined by the current version of the County's Zoning Rewrite. A final version will be submitted to the County Council next summer.

## **Potential for Positive Impact on Health Outcomes**

### *1. An Emphasis on Creating Mixed-use Spaces*

Mixed-use developments foster a more equitable use of space that leads to an increase in physical activity,<sup>3</sup> reductions in obesity,<sup>4</sup> and less time spent in cars, as residents are more likely to walk for both transport and recreation.<sup>5</sup> The transit oriented/activity center base zones should lead to an increase in physical activity. Walking to and from public transit is linked to an increase in daily exercise, particularly among low-income and minority subgroups,<sup>6</sup> and bringing retail, occupational, and public transportation opportunities into a walkable built environment could result in less time spent in cars, and more time walking to destinations in and around such developments in the County.

### *2. Improved Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*

Zoning can be an important tool for increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Efforts to improve access are important for Prince George's County as nearly 16 percent of residents are food insecure<sup>7</sup>, and within some census tracts, more than 25 percent are food insecure.<sup>8</sup>

The zoning rewrite takes some good first steps toward increasing access by allowing community gardens in all zones, expanding the number of areas where urban farming is allowed, and also allowing permanent farmers' markets. Community gardens, and access to farmers' markets, have been linked to an increase fruit and vegetable consumption.<sup>9,10</sup> Commercial urban farming may also have the potential to bring healthy food to areas where access is currently limited.

### *3. Pedestrian and Bicycle Friendly Developments*

The requirements for new developments to establish sidewalks and bike lanes, and meet minimum pedestrian and bicycle connectivity standards, should lead to increased physical activity for people who live, work, and shop in these developments. Multiple studies have shown that when built environments are walking and biking friendly residents are more likely to be active.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup> Additionally, research highlights that neighborhood walkability can lead to a decrease in BMI<sup>14</sup> regardless of income,<sup>15</sup> and can be even more important for reducing BMI than simply living in a mixed-use area.<sup>16</sup> When implemented in mixed-use areas, these targeted efforts should have a positive impact, and result in an increase in residents' level of physical activity.

Additionally, traffic calming measures required for residential developments could also have a positive impact on the health of residents in those neighborhoods. Studies have shown that some traffic calming measures lead to increased traffic safety, as well as an increase in physical activity.<sup>17</sup>

### *4. Open Space Set-Aside Standards*

The prioritization of natural landscape and parks in particular should have a positive effect as green spaces have been linked to improved mental health,<sup>18, 19</sup> and parks have been linked to increased levels of walking and bicycling.<sup>20</sup> The literature regarding green spaces has also demonstrated positive environmental impacts, as they are associated with better air quality,<sup>21</sup> decreased temperatures during the summer,<sup>22</sup> and natural storm-water management.<sup>23</sup>

### *5. Green Building Standards*

The establishment of a green building standards points system, and incentives to motivate builders to add additional green features should also have a positive impact on the health of PG County residents. The new standards should help reduce the amount of air pollutants in buildings, preserve natural landscape, and add to quality of life through community gardens. Living in green buildings has been associated with improved air quality,<sup>24</sup> and a reduction in asthma symptoms among children.<sup>25</sup> Studies show that working in such buildings has been linked to reduced absenteeism from work attributed to asthma, respiratory allergies, depression, and stress, as well as self-reported improvements in productivity.<sup>26</sup>

#### *6. Community Involvement*

Improvements to community notification and public comment requirement for new developments could foster increased community participation during the approval process.

The notification requirements are however overly reliant on mail, posted signs on development properties, and newspapers. These activities could be strengthened by using newer technologies, such as social media, a website, or email. Additionally, we would encourage the county to consider notification requirements that consider basic literacy levels, the needs of non-English speakers, and the use of translators or other instruments that would facilitate participation during community meetings.

#### **Health Equity Opportunities Declined - Limitations of the County's Rewrite Effort**

##### *Lack of attention to established neighborhoods*

One significant limitation of the proposed zoning rewrite is that it predominantly affects new developments. Residents living in established neighborhoods may not benefit from the same health advantages as those who move to newly developed areas. While it is likely all residents would benefit from additional green space, or shopping centers that encourage walking, the rewrite would not address connectivity and transportation issues that already plague existing neighborhoods. Retrofitting is equity-oriented, but will likely require additional County resources.

##### *Health Equity in all Policies Safeguard Mechanism*

A Health Equity in all Policies (HEIAP) Safeguard Mechanism is a policy device designed to ensure that human health always trumps the competing priority whenever a conflict arises between a development and public health. Although the proposed rewrite establishes the process for project applications and approvals, which significantly strengthens the community notifications and involvement, incorporating this intentionality safeguard is warranted to ensure that the health of County residents is never threatened by a new development – even when residents are not at the table during real-time decision-making processes. The city of College Park, Maryland has established such a safeguard which could serve as a model for the Prince George's County.<sup>27</sup>

##### *Improving Access to Healthy Food*

The proposed zoning rewrite emphasizes an increase in mixed-use development, which would likely lead to an increase in walk-able retail options, but there are no policies that would incent and encourage the development of grocery stores in food deserts. Many jurisdictions have attempted to create such incentives through local tax codes, while others have adopted incentives through zoning ordinances. New York City, for instance, instituted the New York Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH)

program using zoning incentives in combination with financial incentives to encourage grocery store development in areas with limited access to healthy food.<sup>28</sup>

Nearly three quarters of Prince George's County restaurants are considered fast food establishments. This is a public health concern as high density of fast food outlets has been linked to an increased risk for obesity.<sup>29</sup> PPGC 2035 specifically mentions the use of zoning to restrict the number of fast food restaurants and the location of fast food outlets in the County,<sup>30</sup> but this is not included in the proposed rewrite, marking a disconnect between the County's established health goals and the zoning rewrite effort. If the County were to adopt such restrictions, it would join a growing number of jurisdictions throughout the country who have taken similar steps.

### *Community Involvement*

Some residents reported that it is difficult to participate in the existing process<sup>31, 32</sup>, but the requirements outlined in the comprehensive draft could potentially increase communication between developers and communities. Specifically, the following recommendations could create a more inclusive process: 1) a clear schedule of community notifications for hearings regarding each type of development; 2) a requirement that the technical staff application report include a summary of citizen comments; 3) a requirement that civic organizations be given the opportunity to register and receive notification when an application is submitted or a hearing is scheduled for a development in their geographic area of influence; and 4) pre-application meetings which could create communication between developers and the community before construction begins. These notifications and meeting requirements should provide citizens with opportunities to have their voices heard, including the opportunity to express any health concerns regarding new developments.

### **Future Directions**

Most importantly, HPRC encouraged Prince George's to include a section in the County code that requires a health assessment of the zoning ordinance every 10 years or another timespan deemed appropriate. This should allow for policy makers to examine data and gain needed insight for evaluating health impact.

We look forward to an even more robust community participation as the rewrite heads into the County Council's approval stage.

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<http://www.pgchealthzone.org/index.php?moduledashboard&alias=alldata&localeId=1260>

<sup>2</sup> Prince George's Zoning Rewrite. Creating a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Zoning Ordinance. Prince George's County Planning Department. Retrieved from the internet. December 2017. <https://pgplanning.civiccomment.org/>

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