



# paradise lost?

By the year 2020,  
will a growing population  
and increased urban development  
hurt the quality of life in the  
Bethesda area?

By Bob Guldin

**T**he Bethesda area may be a great place to live now, but what will it be like in the year 2020? Will it have fallen victim to its own appeal?

The things that have attracted current residents—great schools and neighborhoods, lively downtowns, access to Washington, D.C., and a strong local economy—will draw more people in the years ahead.

“The biggest challenge is that everybody wants to live” there, says Kathy Reilly, Montgomery County planner-coordinator for the Bethesda area. “It’s so vibrant and diverse.”

For decades, Bethesda has been making the transition from a leafy bedroom community to a thriving urban center. That change will continue, and may even accelerate, bringing more residents, more traffic—and a need for some smart planning to maintain the attractive quality of life.

According to the Montgomery County Planning Department, the Bethesda-Chevy Chase study area (the area west of Rock Creek and inside the Beltway) contained about 92,000 residents in 2005. Planners expect about 112,000 residents by 2020, and 119,000 by 2030. That’s not surprising, given the county’s strong growth over several decades, an expansion that is expected to continue as a population of about 951,000 in 2008 rises to about 1,075,00 in 2020.

The county forecasts that most of the surrounding communities will also grow steadily. Between 2005 and 2020, the Rockville area’s population could grow from about 52,000 to 68,000; North Bethesda could increase from 41,000 to 68,000; Kensington/Wheaton could go from 77,000 to 85,000; and Silver Spring from 35,000 to 55,000. The bottom line: southern Montgomery County communities, including Bethesda, Chevy Chase, North Bethesda and Rockville, are projected to be the fastest-growing areas in the county over the next 11 years. (The one real exception to the pattern is Potomac, where the population is expected to hold steady at about 47,000 over the next 30 years.)

For an area that’s densely populated already, that kind of growth could be hard



Bethesda Green's  
Dave Feldman

to absorb. It will mean more cars and more crowded public transit, more energy use, more pollution and waste, and a greater demand for every kind of amenity, from schools to parks to senior centers.

But population growth isn’t all bad. A growing population will boost housing values, help local businesses and result in more tax revenue for the support of public services.

## too much, too fast?

The biggest question facing the Bethesda area is: Where will all the new residents live? As Rollin Stanley, Montgomery County’s planning director, likes to point out, only 4 percent of the county’s land is still open for building, given current zoning. So putting the new arrivals in subdivisions in distant suburbs probably won’t work.

The answer, according to most local planners, is creating new clusters of tall buildings to increase urban density. Stanley says building on a larger scale makes sense for Bethesda’s urban center and all along Metro’s Red Line from Bethesda to Shady Grove. Apartment and condo buildings close to public transit probably will be more than 200 feet tall, with smaller buildings in areas that aren’t close to transit hubs.

Planners call this approach the “New Urbanism.” The idea is to create walkable, attractive, high-density communities near mass transit where people can live, work and shop and where cars are

not a daily necessity.

Many believe the trend toward bigger buildings and a more urban scene is unstoppable. Dave Feldman, executive director of Bethesda Green, a local nonprofit that promotes sustainable development, says, “Is Bethesda changing from a bedroom community to an urban area? Yes, it’s moving toward high density. We need to adjust to a different lifestyle.”

But some residents who perceive the last remnants of small-town atmosphere disappearing from Bethesda and the surrounding towns express unhappiness with high-rises and big-city traffic. “For people who have been around for a long time, there are concerns that things are happening too fast,” says Ilaya Hopkins, who until July 1 was president of the East Bethesda Citizens Association. “We have to be sensitive to the natural resources we have, to the joy of having green spaces in our increasingly urban environment. We have lots of little gems—the trick is preserving them.”

Carol Trawick, Bethesda business leader and co-founder of the Jim and Carol Trawick Foundation, says, “We have to adjust to the population explosion, that’s a reality. But that doesn’t mean we have to lose our human scale—we need to maintain it. We don’t all want to live in high-rises.”

Roger Berliner, the county council member who represents Bethesda, Chevy Chase and Potomac, favors a middle ground on that issue. “I believe we can enjoy the New Urbanism and protect the quality of life of older neighborhoods,” he says.

A step toward maintaining the area’s traditional housing stock came in 2008, when the county council passed Berliner-sponsored legislation to restrict the practice of tearing down houses and building much larger “McMansions” on relatively small lots. The law reduced the allowable size of replacement houses by about 20 percent, restricting both new house “footprints” and their heights.

Bethesda Realtor Jane Fairweather predicts that most neighborhoods in the year 2020 “will look pretty much the same” as they do now. The teardown trend will continue, she says, but people will build smaller homes than they did a few years ago because of the anti-McMansion law, the high



cost of energy and the aging of the population.

According to U.S. Census Bureau and Maryland Department of Planning forecasts, the number of people 60 years of age and older living in Montgomery County will increase 37 percent by 2020, from about 181,000 in 2010 to 248,000.

“Who’s going to live in large houses?” Fairweather asks.

The aging of the population also will increase the demand for condos, town houses and apartments in downtown areas, she says, because older people want to be close to restaurants and stores and want a sense of community.

## a glimpse of the future

If you want a glimpse of what the New Urbanism will be like, take a look at the redevelopment plans for the White Flint area. “The Rockville Pike is currently a

strip mall on steroids,” Berliner says. The question is, “Can it evolve into the paradigm of the New Urbanism?”

Stanley has high hopes. “I’d like to see a tree-lined boulevard with transit down the middle of it,” he says, “and much more vibrancy in the streets. In 10 years, you’ll see more local streets that create grids—not those super-blocks that surround the shopping centers.”

Nkosi Yearwood, the county’s senior planner for White Flint, says that as the area shifts away from its strip mall retail landscape, the county wants to combine “vertical living” with “horizontal living.” That could mean parks, open space, public plazas, wide sidewalks and a median with trees to go along with the apartment buildings.

Hopkins, the East Bethesda neighborhood leader who is also co-chairwoman of the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board’s Education and Quality of Life Committee, is skeptical that the county can make the White Flint plan work.

“The ideas are fine on paper,” she says. “We need to see them translated into reality.”

Berliner acknowledges that when it comes to remaking White Flint, “the details will be fiercely contested.”

According to Yearwood, plans are similar for the areas near the Twinbrook, Rockville and Shady Grove Metro stations. “Not as intense as White Flint,” he says, “but the same sorts of principles.”

The Woodmont Triangle section of Bethesda will be another area in the midst of a transformation by 2020. In 2006, the county council passed a plan that permits much denser development, including tall condo and apartment buildings, in an area that is currently defined by low-rise buildings and smaller, locally owned shops.

The recession has put virtually all development in the Woodmont Triangle on hold. But by 2020, many of the new projects are expected to be under way.

A number of small-business owners in the Woodmont Triangle worry that rede-

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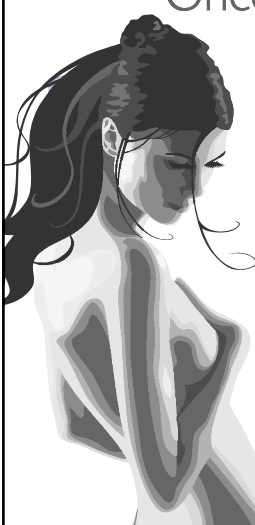
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velopment will drive them out of business, which would alter the small-town feel of the area. “As development comes, the rents go up. It’s hard for local businesses to stay in business,” says Neal Freed, president of Freed Photography on Cordell Avenue.

Ginanne Italiano, president of The Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce, says small businesses in the Woodmont Triangle will face challenges, but most will survive. “There are loan programs and financing programs, especially for businesses that have been here for a long time,” she says. “And most of the residential projects will have space for retail on the first floor—but will the mom-and-pops be able to afford it?”

Italiano says there will still be areas—“a half block here, a quarter block there—with lots of quaint and unique businesses.”

**playing in traffic**

Perhaps the toughest single problem the Bethesda area will face as it moves toward 2020 will be getting people where they want to go. With a growing population and more development, traffic will continue to get worse, even if more people take mass transit.

Dan Hardy, the county’s chief transportation planner, says traffic in Bethesda and North Bethesda (including part of Rockville Pike) is expected to increase 15 percent over the next 10 years, given projected developments already approved by the county.

Traffic in the Bethesda area is expected to be made worse by the shift of up to 2,500 military jobs to the National Naval Medical Center (formerly Bethesda Naval Hospital). A Montgomery County study predicts that the military’s realignment plan will add about 900 cars to both the morning and evening rush hours near the National Institutes of Health.

In addition, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments expects the number of jobs in its “Bethesda-NIH Cluster” to grow from 94,000 in 2005 to 108,000 in 2030, and for the number in



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Neighborhood leader Ilaya Hopkins



MATTHEW BORKOSKI

the North Bethesda-Rockville area to grow from 104,000 in 2005 to 143,000 in 2030. More jobs mean more commuters and more traffic.

The Purple Line—a light-rail connection between New Carrollton in Prince George’s County and Bethesda—may be built by 2020 to ease some of the east-west traffic (just how much is the subject of intense debate between Purple Line supporters and opponents). The line will probably follow the Capital Crescent Trail east of Bethesda, come through the train tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue and end in front of the Bethesda Row Cinema. A new entrance would be carved at the south end of the Bethesda Metro station, providing easy passage between the Red Line and Purple Line stations.

While the prospects generally look good for the quality of life in the Bethesda area in 2020, one of the biggest unknowns is the future of the local economy. If it worsens or is slow to recover, times will become far more difficult for the area’s many businesses, and construction plans will continue to be put on hold. But Hopkins, the neighborhood leader, says a slow economic recovery could have a silver lining. It would “give us a little breathing space,” she says. “We do have a great thing going here—we don’t want to lose it.”

*Bob Guldin is a writer and editor based in Takoma Park.*

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