

CECIL WHIG

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News

County leaders leaning toward more-cautious public facilities law

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The county is looking into a long-touted proposal that ensures sufficient public services are in step with Cecil County growth, but the ordinance may undergo stark changes from a version shown last year to towns and residents.

Despite affirming their desire to continue with the adequate public facilities law, several county officials said Tuesday they wanted to see some rewrites to the proposal.

"I don't know if we need to start out this aggressive," County Administrator Al Wein said during a workshop with county commissioners. "It's probably better to move in a staged manner rather than bring on all the public services."

Wein suggested the county first adopt a scaled-down version of the ordinance penned by Cecilton Mayor John Bunnell, with other infrastructure issues, such as fire and law-enforcement support, to be added in the future.

A less ambitious proposal, Wein said, would ensure more concentration on issues that already have commonly accepted standards of adequacy, such as roads and schools.

"I'm perfectly fine with phasing things in. It seems like the reasonable way to go," Bunnell said. "From the start, we wanted to focus on what I call the 'Big Four': roads, schools, water and sewer."

County Commissioner Re-becca Demmler also said some of the draft's language needs to be tightened. But according to Bunnell, some of the language was intentionally vague to allow flexibility for changes in the future.

Under the ordinance, new residential development could be approved by the county and towns only if public infrastructure such as local roads, schools, and water and sewer services are fit to handle more users.

The proposal, however, could easily unravel and devastate county growth plans, with its dependence on carefully drafted language and an alliance of Cecil County and its eight towns.

"I suggest you move cautiously before adopting this so that you don't fall into the same pitfalls as some other jurisdictions," Eric Sennstrom, the county's planning director, told the commissioners.

The result, he said, could be subdivisions sprawling across areas intended for open space, rather than regions planned to handle new homes.

But the concern of an ordinance gone awry isn't the plan's only hurdle: Several local lawmakers are sparring over a funding source for infrastructure improvements.

The Board of County Commissioners has historically asked for the imposition of an impact fee or excise tax to pay

for new schools and roads.

The county's state lawmakers say that charging new residents is a move that is not needed to make the ordinance work. Money for the new facilities should come from the developer, said state Delegate Michael Smigiel (R-Upper Shore).

"We believe that increased taxes are not the answer," he said. "A free-market system is the answer."

County Attorney Dwight Thomey said the lack of impact fees could hinder any planning for infrastructure improvements.

"You have to have a plan in place," he said. "You can't wait for the developer to come in and build a school for you."

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