SCI

Sustainable Cities Initiative

Chapter 3: Rezoning Montgomery
People, Politics, and Place

Image: Downtown Silver Spring, Montgomery County, MD. http://www.downtownsilverspring.com

The Issue

Montgomery County, Maryland is well known for its progressive approaches to land use and development pattern. County leaders in 2008 began the process of revising the county zoning ordinance at least in part to accommodate a more urban, less suburban development pattern.

At this writing, a new draft zoning ordinance is under review by the county council. But while the last chapter remains to be written, the story is already rich with technical complexity, political controversy, and hard lessons learned.

The Implications

This chapter seeks to display the processes, trials, and tribulations that occur when reforming zoning codes in a suburban county.

Project Information

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Excerpt taken from Chapter 3 Rezoning Montgomery in the text:
Retrofitting Sprawl: Addressing Seventy Years of Failed Urban Form. Edited by Emily Talen. 2015.

The Research

Key Points and Practice Takeaways:

1. Expect controversy. Zoning is a power instrument that makes zoning change unavoidably political and difficult.

2. It is important to clarify whether revisions of zoning ordinances serve only to clean up and modernize existing ordinances or if they are intended to implement policy change. If the latter, it is important to seek consensus before the process begins.

3. Constrain expectations. Those seeking radical change will likely be disappointed.

4. There is no ideal zoning ordinance. The "reformed" zoning ordinance will likely need to blend traditional, form-based, and performance zoning approaches to meet the vagaries and historical roots of local circumstances.

5. Engaging more than usual suspects will take an unusual effort. Some citizens and constituent groups are always engaged in local government policy issues; engaging people of color, immigrants, and working-class populations will require extra effort.