

Case Study: Loudoun County, Virginia

For hundreds of years Loudoun County, Virginia, has been characterized by green infrastructure (agricultural land, forests, streams, and mountainsides) and heritage resource assets (historic, prehistoric, and scenic sites). Those special attributes make the county an attractive place to live and contribute to the regional economy.

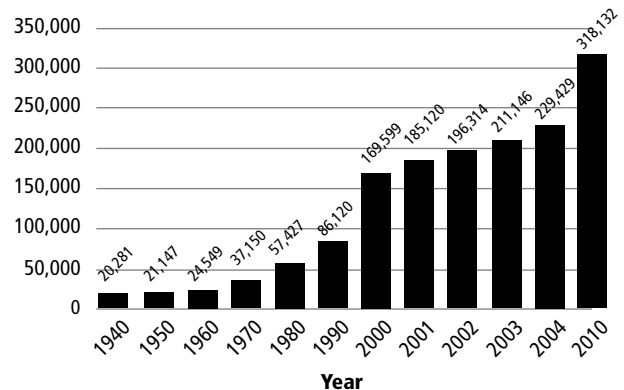
Loudoun County also finds itself conveniently located about 35 miles west of Washington, D.C., where it has become home to a growing number of businesses and people. By the 1990s, Loudoun County had been transformed into one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation. How much development can a rural community support and still retain its visual and cultural character? Loudoun County is still struggling to find out.

Background

Loudoun County was once a quiet, rural community dominated by vegetable and horse farms. Towns served as the centers of population and commerce, with land beyond their corporate limits planned for rural, residential, or agricultural uses. For 200 years, the population remained at approximately 20,000 residents. However, beginning in 1960, the county began to experience rapid change. Population growth in neighboring Fairfax County began to spill into Loudoun County. The expansion of sewer service in eastern Loudoun County and the opening in 1962 of Washington Dulles International Airport, which straddles Loudoun and Fairfax Counties, encouraged residential and commercial development—and helped to set a new course of growth for the county. Land around the airport was rezoned to accommodate airport-related businesses, which encouraged large companies to locate in the area, including two telecommunication giants in the 1990s: America Online and WorldCom. Businesses took advantage of the large tracts of relatively inexpensive, open land (also called “greenfields”) to build large commercial complexes.

The new businesses helped to attract new residents, who, in turn, created the need for more housing options. During the 1960s and in each decade that followed, Loudoun County’s population rose by at least 50 percent (see Figure 1). In 1950, the population of Loudoun County was 21,147. In 2000, that number had grown to 169,599. From 2000 to 2005, the population increased 46% to 247,293. Development in the county shifted from a more traditional rural style toward a suburban land use pattern that included new commercial shopping strips with big parking lots in front, houses with deep setbacks, and very long blocks. Farmland in the western part of the county began to be subdivided into three-acre residential lots. New residents demanded services, such as trash pickup, which had not been historically provided in the county.

Figure 1 Loudoun County, Virginia, Population, 1940–2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Loudoun County Department of Economic Development, and Loudoun County Fiscal Impact Committee 2004, (E).

During that time, Loudoun County also experienced tremendous commercial construction. From 1990 to 2000, more than 2,000 new companies, including several major employers, located in the county. Between 1991 and 2000, unemployment rates dropped from 3.5 percent to 0.09 percent.

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Growing Pains

The rapid development of Loudoun County also brought a host of problems, including water quantity and quality issues. The increase in impervious land cover (i.e., asphalt and concrete) prevented rainwater from filtering through the soil and replenishing groundwater. In turn, this situation both diminished groundwater capacity and damaged streams. Culverts and other pipe systems transported water in much higher volumes and at much greater velocities than natural systems, causing erosion of stream banks. Stormwater runoff containing pollutants such as litter, road salt, oil, and metals then found its way into local waterways.

The county also faced transportation problems as rural roads and thoroughfares failed to meet increased demands. Commuters traveling to and from Loudoun County faced increased traffic delays.

Loudoun County struggled to keep up with its growth, expanding infrastructure and services for new residents. This expansion led to an increase in county costs, a growing debt burden, and higher tax rates. State assistance was also enlisted to provide new roads for the area.

Residents began to speak out against the negative effects of growth. Citizens were concerned about the increases in traffic congestion, the destruction of scenic views, and the disappearance of farmland. Some residents felt that uncontrolled development was destroying the essence of what made the county a special place in which to live. They believed that if Loudoun County continued to develop at the current rate, it would become a less-desirable place and that real estate values would drop. Some homeowners resented having to pay additional property taxes to cover the cost of new services. Each new house cost the county more than \$21,000 in school construction, public security, and other costs, and some residents felt that developers, who benefited most from the development, should help pay those costs.



A Smarter Approach

Loudoun residents began to advocate a smarter approach to growth. They felt that with improved planning, the county could preserve the farmland economy, help protect stream corridors, reduce traffic, safeguard the area's physical beauty, and maintain the community's character. Cluster or conservation design could maximize green space and protect watersheds by directing growth to compact neighborhoods in town centers or to other designated "growth" areas. Furthermore, controlling growth in the county could cut the number of new schools needed in half. (The 1991 County Plan predicted the need for 125 new schools; with proposed growth management changes, the county would need only 64 new schools.)

Some residents, however, were concerned that controlling growth would increase housing values and price lower-income residents out of the market. Private property rights advocates also opposed growth management measures, suggesting that zoning and growth control constituted an infringement of their rights. Some rural landowners also opposed new measures, wanting instead to retain the freedom to sell their land for profit. In November 1999, the citizens of Loudoun County voted out of office all but one member of the nine-member county board of supervisors, favoring the candidates who promoted slower growth. As a start, the new board voted to give the county more money for school

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construction and the authority to limit building permits if government facilities were not in place to meet the needs of new residents. From 2000 to 2001, the citizens, the planning commission, the board of supervisors, the county staff, and the consultants worked to create an ambitious new vision for the county in its Revised Comprehensive Plan.

Community support would be vital to the plan's implementation and success, so the revised plan was prepared with extensive citizen involvement. The planning team made efforts to allow easy access to new information and to the planning process. For example, public notebooks containing relevant documents and information were placed in six public libraries and in the department of planning. The planning department also posted documents on its website. All sessions of the planning commission and board of supervisors were open to the public and recorded on audiotapes. In early 2000, the planning commission held three initial sessions for public input. Several months later, more than 450 people attended three planning forums and discussed the issues in a more interactive format. Focus groups on environmental implementation and on community design and identity were also part of the process. The planning team held a public input forum before the preparation of the draft. Subsequently, the planning commission conducted more than 17 hours of public hearings on the draft before a revised version was finally adopted on July 23, 2001.

The New Plan

Loudoun County's new plan revolved around the concept that "development should be systematic, in compact communities, and in the right location, in order to function well and to enable the county to provide adequate, and cost-efficient, public services." Key features of the county's new plan included the following:

- Identify and protect its "Green Infrastructure"—defined as the county's environmental, natural resource, and heritage features—through zoning for clustered lots, open space, and increased rural land uses.
- Establish separate areas for growth and areas to be protected for rural purposes. About 300 square miles, or about two-thirds of the county, would be preserved.
- Focus development in four traditional towns in the eastern part of the county that have town centers and mixed-use design features.
- Reduce the number of homes that can be built by 44 percent countywide.
- Increase rural land uses to enhance the rural economy.
- Alter zoning in the western part of the county to retain rural character. In the southwest, 1 home is permitted per 50 acres (or 1 home per 20 acres if development is clustered to save open space). In the northwest, 1 home is permitted per 20 acres (1 home per 10 acres if clustered). Those zoning policies will reduce new home construction from the proposed 187,000 to 110,000 houses. Before passage of the new plan, developers were able to build one house per 3 acres.
- Maintain the existing Purchase of Development Rights program, a voluntary incentive for property owners to keep their land as open space.
- Commit the county to evaluate future development proposals on the basis of its ability to treat and distribute a safe and adequate drinking water supply.
- Commit the county to strengthen its affordable housing policies.
- Concentrate the development of transportation systems in designated suburban growth areas and towns.
- Promote significant improvements to pedestrian and bicycle networks.
- Focus on other pedestrian-friendly features on streets.
- Require developers to provide a larger share of the capital facilities costs associated with residential construction.

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Implementing the Plan

Loudoun County implemented its Revised Comprehensive Plan beginning in 2003. The board of supervisors adopted revisions to the county's zoning ordinance and a new zoning map. The county sought to maintain the rural character of western Loudoun by protecting it from suburban sprawl and by encouraging small-scale businesses such as inns, wineries, and retreats. The rationale was that growth should occur in existing communities in the eastern portion of the county. However, the new rules fueled controversy within the state and raised questions about the constitutionality and sensibility of the plan.

The policy did not seem to abate the county's economic problems. Residents feared that the strict regulations would increase housing prices. Some argued that the uncontrolled growth had put the county into debt and increased property taxes. Furthermore, nearly 200 lawsuits had been filed against the county, which had caused it to set aside \$6 million to cover defense fees.

Residents worried that the policies would increase sprawl. The *Washington Post* backed that theory after examining policies designed to protect rural areas in 14 other counties in Maryland and Northern Virginia. In those counties, suburban sprawl actually increased because residents were forced to move away from urban areas in attempts to find affordable housing.

Members of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors faced re-election in November 2003. The election had the potential of changing the leadership and even the nature of the smart growth policy. When the votes were counted the slow-growth politicians who had made up the Board of Supervisors were defeated. The election put an end to the "smart-growth" plan, and brought a board that followed more of a "market growth" approach. The board removed many of the growth restraints enacted by the previous board. This

cleared the way for Loudoun County to have the third-fastest annual growth rate in the nation between 2003 and 2004 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The growth rate was an 8.1% population increase. The new board however, did not remove the restrictive zoning regulations in the western part of the county. During this period the county government was also given the green light for development to an already expanding business community. More jobs meant more people, which mean more schools, roads, and more office buildings.

In March of 2005, the Virginia Supreme Court declared the 2003 zoning law in the western part of the county invalid. The court ruled that the public was not given proper public notice concerning the zoning hearings and that the officials had not clearly specified the boundaries of the land that was to be rezoned. County planners hope a rewrite of the plan will be approved. According to a county planner, development in 2006 is nearly a free-for-all as builders rush to start projects before regulations are in place.

Today, residents struggle to identify the county's character and its future. One resident said, "What is Loudoun County? Are we a high-tech county? That didn't work. Are we rural? We don't want to be rural.... We're still trying to figure out what we want to be when we grow up."

Sources:

Davenport 2006 (B).

Laris 2003 (B).

Laris and Whoriskey 2001 (B).

Loudoun County Board of Supervisors 2005 (E).

Milligan 2003 (B).

