

ON THE BAY

Still fighting for the soul of Balto. Co.

Mission: After 42 years, Valleys Planning Council remains focused on Greenspring, Worthington and Caves valleys.

By TOM HORTON
SUN STAFF

Cannot we create from a beautiful, natural landscape an environment inhabited by man in which natural beauty is retained?

— Plan for the Valleys of Baltimore County, 1962

THAT pretty much sums up what we should be about here on this earth — peaceful co-existence between us and the plants and the animals, making room for people without trashing what attracted them.

Sounds like a job for the Sierra Club. But it was a bunch of Baltimore businessmen, golfers and gentleman farmers who foresaw the coming sprawl. They raised an outrageous sum for the time — \$300,000 — for a plan to retain the rural character of tens of thousands of acres in the Greenspring, Worthington and Caves valleys.

They hired Ian McHarg, who was just writing his *Design With Nature*, which would become a classic of landscape design worldwide.

McHarg let the Baltimore County landscape shape the plan. The "genius" of the place, he felt, lay in the rural-agricultural valley floors and the forested slopes. They must be protected, even as development was steered to densely clustered villages along the plateaus.

This was Smart Growth decades before the concept became a nationwide approach to development. And more than 40 years later, though tattered in places, the genius of the valleys persists.

Ironically, the part that had the least success, and which is also proving the hardest for modern Smart Growth, was creating high-density development.

The old Green Spring Valley Association, formed in 1962 to plan the valleys' future, became in 1968 the Valleys Planning Council, a private advocate for the rural landscape that remains a vital force in county land use.

Building on the precedent set by the Valleys' plan, Baltimore County enacted an Urban-Rural Demarcation Line in 1967. Unique in Maryland, and rare anywhere, the URDL declared in concept that the half of the county north of the Beltway should remain essentially rural.

Since then, there has been many a battle over making the vision a reality — and plenty of losses with the victories — but by and large, the war's still being

The Valleys Planning Council

In the News

won (and still being fought).

I've been living part-time in the north county for a couple years, but its ambience helped Baltimore keep an Eastern Shore boy who enrolled at the Johns Hopkins University many decades ago.

I was overwhelmed by the city and shocked by its rowhouses. "How do they tell which is theirs when they come home?" I asked my mom on delivery to college.

I came to live in, and love, rowhouses. But that was later. In college, I learned a great secret of Baltimore: You could get out of it quickly, into some of the finest countryside the Mid-Atlantic region has to offer.

This week, reminded that he will soon retire, I reminisced with Jack Dillon, head of the Valleys Planning Council since 1996 and a Baltimore County planner since the 1960s. He had a front-row seat for the events shaping the north county.

Grand vision might have begun it all, but these days Jack's thinking potholes — as in not repairing them.

"Seriously, the pressure is so great now to widen and straighten and resurface all our country roads, we need to do everything we can to reduce the use of them," he said.

So it is that the Valleys Planning Council is advocating for retaining bridges too narrow to pass on, roads that wind and dip and slow your trip — just part of a suite of rural design standards it would like the county to adopt.

Loss of forest is another problem. "The trees are just being nibbled away, and few people recognize how bad the problem is," Dillon said.

For every other natural system that helps filter and cleanse Chesapeake Bay — wetlands, oyster reefs, submerged grasses — we have goals to increase them. But not for forests.

Dillon asked whether I had noticed the new cell phone towers around Butler and at Falls Road and Tufton Avenue. I said I was surprised that I'd missed such monstrosities in those lovely settings.

That's the point, he said. They are small "stealth" towers, disguised as flag poles, negotiated by Valleys Planning. Dillon got the idea from Albemarle County, Va., which has told phone companies, "Build as many towers as you want; just make sure we don't notice them."

By contrast, Maryland has gone for huge towers, shared by multiple phone companies — fewer in number but ruinous of the landscape's character for miles around.

The war for the soul of the north county continues, always will. What we do with the bridges and roads — bigger, faster, straighter or narrow, bumpy, windy — will indicate whether the remarkable vision is still holding.