

Introduction to the Federation Workshop on Urbanization

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The Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations organized this meeting to inform county citizens of the county's Board of Supervisor's urbanization plan, especially with regard to increasing the Floor/Area Ratio (FAR) to 5.0 in areas being considered for redevelopment. A FAR of 5 corresponds to building heights on the order of 15 to 20 stories -- buildings 200 feet high. Taller buildings allow greater profits to developers; therefore, developers will be encouraged to undertake the construction projects.

The county needs more people per acre to accommodate the many people who want to live here. All of the land has already been developed, so densification, also called urbanization, is needed to accommodate the increase in population. Densification will increase the supply of homes and, therefore, make homes more affordable. Densification could be beneficial in areas that need revitalization. But densification is a complicated issue, especially as it affects traffic and transportation.

Between 2009 and 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, single-family-detached homes have decreased in number while townhomes have increased in number, giving a net growth of single-family homes of 348 per year. The number of multi-family homes has increased six times faster -- by 2166 dwelling units per year. So densification is occurring. The population has grown 0.8% per year (7959 people per year); the number of dwelling units, by 0.6% per year (2513 units per year). For planning purposes, the county uses the following factors: the number of public-school students per single-family household is 0.53, corresponding to 0.69 children per household (one child per 1.4 households), and 0.078 students per multi-family household, corresponding to 0.11 children per household (one child per 9.0 households).

A few years ago, as part of the densification, the county proposed allowing every home to be converted to apartment buildings consisting of Residential Studio Units. In response to objections from the county citizens and a 2013 resolution from the Federation, the county has shelved this program. Previously, in 2011, in response to county's densification plan, the Federation crafted a resolution asking the county to put restrictions on itself on rezoning from residential areas to planned development areas. Planned development areas such as PDH, PDC, PRC, and PRM allow for higher densities. The county has not adopted these restrictions. The FAR 5 proposal is the latest countywide effort, although many individual sites are currently being rezoned to higher densities.

I don't see any legal method for county citizens to limit the densification of their neighborhoods. Only if enough citizens object will the Board of Supervisors reconsider the plans. Of course, not all citizens will object. Some welcome densification of their neighborhoods. So the Federation organized this meeting so all citizens can become informed about the impacts and issues concerning densification so they can let their supervisors know what they want in their neighborhoods.