

How Baltimore County can fix its broken zoning process

By [Baltimore Sun Editorial Board](#)

Baltimore Sun

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May 15, 2023 at 1:02 pm



You don't have to live next door to the LaFarge Quarry in Middle River to recognize that there's something amiss with how Baltimore County makes land use decisions. To those who haven't tracked the [on-again, off-again dramatics](#) surrounding the plan to turn what had been a sand and gravel quarry into an industrial park, here's the short version: The controversial project was given fast-track approval last fall when it was located in the district of Councilmember Cathy Bevins, a Democrat who chose not to run for reelection. That approval now seems to be in the process of fast-track revocation as it sits in the district of [Councilmember David Marks, a Perry Hall Republican](#).

Rest assured, the 450-acre quarry didn't move, but council redistricting significantly changed the political map. No matter how one may feel about the specifics of the project — and local opposition has certainly been evident — why should a major land use decision be treated like the spoils of a political war, where a major decision can be passed today but then reversed soon after?

At the heart of this about-face is the remarkably broad latitude the Baltimore County Council has long granted its individual members over planning and zoning decisions in their districts. This is particularly

true when it comes to what are known as “planned unit developments” or PUDs, mixed use developments that can be approved by the council under certain conditions — including “public benefit” that may or may not exist.

Bevins’ support for the LaFarge PUD by Holcim-MAR and the Chesapeake Real Estate Group was the primary reason it was approved on a 4-3 vote; Marks’ opposition is why the council is now poised to reverse it next month. This is euphemistically known as “councilmanic courtesy.” That’s a lot of power to put in the hands of a single council member, and, given that developers are inevitably the biggest contributors to local political campaigns, the opportunity for favoritism (or worse) is apparent. And that’s not even mentioning how Baltimore County now looks something less-than-serious when it come to land use decisions. What developer is going to invest millions in some desirable project in the county — much-needed workforce housing, for example — if the planning rug can be pulled out from them anytime the local council member feels so disposed?

Here’s how County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. and members of the County Council can fix this embarrassing practice. First — and this is the good news — one significant step toward reform has already been taken. The campaign finance reform measure approved by voters in 2020 creates a “Fair Election Fund” to make candidates for county office far less reliant on big donors. It will apply for the first time in the 2026 election and will give qualifying candidates the chance to opt for public financing. The next step on this front may be to expand the number of council seats. Right now, it’s a seven-member body. But given Baltimore County has 850,000 residents, making it Maryland third most populous subdivision, a recalibration is overdue. The [Montgomery County Council has 11 seats](#); so does the [Prince George’s County Council](#). The Baltimore City Council has 14. Should so few people in Baltimore County have so much power over so many lives?

Next, it’s time to take a second look at the overall planning process. That can begin with an independent review of the PUD law and whether it’s working in the best interests of the county. But it also should be about strengthening the authority of the 10-year Master Plan and not the once-every-four years “comprehensive zoning maps” that should adhere to the Master Plan’s broad outlines but often do not. Simply redrawing the maps every decade in tandem with the Master Plan should solve this oddity. It would also be wise to give the general public and the county’s planning board a bigger say in land use decisions. The goal, after all, is to make choices less parochial and more likely to serve the broader interests of all those who live in Baltimore County.

Of course, there will always be disputes and controversial choices. And current council members are likely to balk at the prospect of having less say in exactly what is permitted in their districts. But county voters didn’t approve the Fair Election Fund in a vacuum. Baltimore County has seen its share of scandals involving preferential treatment in the past, including back-to-back bribe-taking county executives, Spiro Agnew and Dale Anderson, the latter of whom ended up in prison. The LaFarge debacle shows something is still broken — or at least it sure looks that way.

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