

My name is Miriam Gboll and I am speaking on behalf of the Calvert Coalition for Smart Growth. I retired from the Calvert County Dept. of Planning & Zoning in 2011 after working there for over 31 years. Before retiring, I was responsible for drafting zoning regulations under the direction of the County Commissioners. I have a bachelor's degree and was a member of the American Institute for Certified Planners.

There are numerous issues with the proposed sign regulations. The most glaring is that you're deleting 35 pages of design criteria from the Town Centers without replacing them. What design criteria is staff supposed to use when a sign application is submitted after these are adopted? We have viewed the proposed Design Guidelines which were presented to the Planning Commission in January. The problem we have with the draft is that they are not unique to each Town Center and they should be. They are extremely generic and nowhere near the quality of the Solomons guidelines. Why not reach out to citizens from each Town Center BEFORE the sign regs are adopted and let them decide how they want their town to look. Now is the perfect time to do that.

But I'd like to speak tonight about the bigger picture and how these regulations will affect our County as a whole. Many people struggle with understanding why we have zoning and the value of it for our citizens.

The reason we have zoning is that most citizens in Calvert County do not wish to live in "Generica America" where all the towns look the same and which is so common in other areas of the country. Zoning is one of the few tools available to prevent that from happening. Calvert County and each of our Town Centers are unique. Each of our Town Centers have Master Plans and Zoning Ordinances which were written based on input from citizens who live in and around those Town Centers. Controlled development thus far is one of the main reasons many citizens have moved here or chosen to stay here. This is also why citizens have been fighting since the adoption of the first Comprehensive Plan in 1974 to preserve the Quality of Life in Calvert County which we all value so much.

The suggestion that more, bigger and brighter signage is an effective tool for business, in particular tourism, is just plain wrong. Most of the popular tourist destinations around the country have strict sign regulations because they know their appeal is based around their authentic sense of place. Sign control is good for business, especially in a County as dependent on

tourism as Calvert. When was the last time you heard anyone say, “Gee, let’s go to Waldorf because it’s such an attractive place to hang out”? What we are going to end up with are streets that look more like the Las Vegas Strip than a small town in a rural County.

In addition, the relevancy of roadside signage as a tool for wayfinding continues to decline every day. When a driver can look up directions or search for a gas station on an iPhone and can get turn by turn instructions via voice command, the roadside signs lose their importance. In addition to the aesthetic concerns posed by excessive signs and particularly digital signs, there are also obvious reasons to be concerned about their effects on driver safety. Distracted driving is the #1 cause of accidents. Billboards and bright signs with changing images are designed to take your eyes off the road. A recent human factors study showed that any distraction that takes a driver’s eyes off the road for more than 1.6 seconds greatly increases the risk of a crash or near-crash. And what happens when you have multiple businesses along a stretch of road, each of which has one of these signs?

We understand that the proposed sign regulations have taken 6 years to get to this point, but that is no reason to take short cuts in the process now that they have been released to the public. At no time during the previous six years were citizens from individual Town Centers consulted. We have spoken to individuals from various Town Centers who say they don’t even know who was on the Ad Hoc Committee let alone having received information about the proposed regs. from them. You can see in the regs that Dunkirk and Solomons are being treated differently because their citizens had the opportunity to voice their opinions. In all fairness, the citizens of the other Town Centers deserve the same opportunity.

Therefore, we request that action on the sign regs be deferred until design guidelines for each Town Center can be developed after allowing citizens to specify what they want their towns to look like. If that is not possible, we request that you direct staff to hold at least one workshop for citizens to submit comments, since we’ve only had 2 weeks to review.