

“St. Tammany’s Future: 527,000 Residents?” [8]

Over 400 residents turning out for a day-long workshop on St. Tammany’s future? Appeals for limiting sprawl? Vocal support for “managing” future growth? Even advocates for affordable housing?!! Something new and different must be happening in St. Tammany.

And well might those citizen activists be concerned. A build-out study of St. Tammany conservatively projects a future population of 527,000 residents. That would almost triple the parish’s current population and make St. Tammany the most populous jurisdiction in Greater New Orleans, exceeding both Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

For the build-out analysis, we asked the question: if everything that current zoning allows actually happened, what would St. Tammany look like?

Using aerial photography, local zoning maps, and their computerized Geographic Information System, the UNO research team estimated the build-out potential of St. Tammany Parish. The results are summarized in Table 9.

Of St. Tammany’s 546,880 total acreage, UNO estimates that only 437,120 acres are buildable. Evaluating already zoned land (primarily in Slidell, Mandeville, Covington, and Madisonville), 57,760 acres zoned for single-family

residential, with only 80% of the land built out at 1.6 housing units per acre (a very conservative assumption), would support a future population of 177,440. Only 1,240 acres are zoned for apartment development; with 80% built out at only five units per acre (most build-out studies elsewhere use 10 units per acre), there would be only 10,420 persons living in apartments.

Adding up land zoned for commercial, industrial, parks, and other institutional uses leaves a residual 352,955 acres in the agricultural/rural category. Much of this land is currently not zoned. None has effective agricultural zoning or other farmland protection measures in place. Allowing for one new housing unit for every two acres on 80% of the land would support 338,830 persons.

Thus, St. Tammany Parish's future population would be an estimated 527,000 residents. Or, alternatively, up to 658,000 residents if the assumption is dropped that only 80% of the land is developed.

At either level of development, farmland and accessible open space would have disappeared. Much more acreage would be devoted to roads and parking lots than parks. This new asphalt jungle would be clogged with over 400,000 cars, trucks, and minivans.

That is a future that few current residents would happily embrace. Yet that is what current zoning (and absence of zoning) would permit. In effect, the

existence of largely uncoordinated general plans and zoning maps for the different municipalities, plus no effective plan for unincorporated areas, represents no parish-wide development strategy at all.

Citizen activists and governmental leaders have launched a comprehensive planning process for St. Tammany Parish. For guidance they could not do better than look to the example of Montgomery County, Maryland.

The differences between metro New Orleans and metro Washington, DC (where Montgomery County is located) are substantial – most importantly, in wealth and income. Yet St. Tammany Parish today occupies the place of Montgomery County fifty years ago – increasingly desirable suburbs, poised for explosive growth, of major but declining central cities.

Thirty years after Montgomery County successfully tamed its runaway development through a comprehensive growth management plan, it is a large but diverse community of startling achievements.

Once purely a bedroom community of the nation's capital, it now is home to the third highest number of jobs in the Greater Washington area.

With almost 800,000 residents within its urban growth area, county government has permanently protected one-third of the county as farmland and open space.

In compliance with county-mandated requirements for mixed-income housing, private builders have delivered over 10,000 affordable housing units integrated seamlessly into new subdivisions and apartment complexes. With one-quarter of the population now minority, Montgomery County is one of the most racially and economically integrated societies in the nation.

Montgomery County is not perfect. It is simply, in my experience, better than anyone else. St. Tammany Parish could learn a great deal from Montgomery County's early failures and more recent successes.

[651 words]