



## **Greater Capital Area Association Takes the Lead in Smart Growth – Twice!**

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Development in Montgomery County, MD, just north of the nation's capital, is growing fast. The Greater Capital Area Association of REALTORS® (GCAAR) wants to make sure it grows *smart*, as well. Two Smart Growth Grants from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® have been helping it do so.

In November 2011, GCAAR received a grant of \$2,500 to help engage its members in land-use and development decisions. “It began as a member education program,” says Amy Ritsko-Warren, Chief Operating Officer of the 8,500-member association, “but it really became a celebration of Montgomery County’s smart growth in action.”

As Bonnie Casper, GCAAR’s Immediate Past President, explains, the once-suburban county is becoming urbanized, and REALTORS® are uniquely positioned to witness the shift. “Demographic and lifestyle changes are putting very real pressure on the real estate market here, and walkability is key. In addition to empty-nesters looking to down-size to a more simplified and convenient way of life, at the other end of the spectrum, first-time buyers and young professionals are preferring to be closer-in. For many, not being able to walk from home to the train, or the gym, or a Starbucks is a deal-breaker.”

The four “Planned Development Information Sessions” GCAAR sponsored drew capacity-attendance from members seeking to understand the changes the county and developers were planning for the near future. At each of the featured venues – suburban hubs located along existing or planned transit infrastructure – representatives from the county’s Planning Board, transit specialists, developers associated with each project, and other involved parties presented their plans for increasing the area’s mixed-use development, housing density and transit options.

“It was a great way for us to connect with different geographic segments of our membership,” notes Ritsko-Warren. “Members have such a deep interest in their particular ‘farm area,’ and may have been able to learn about various plans in a piecemeal way, but they clearly appreciated this complete ‘umbrella’ of information relating specifically to them and their areas,” she says. “The sessions were also an effective way to engage the REALTOR® community with local elected leaders, planning staff, developers, and builders from a proactive stance, before the shovel is in the ground, so to speak.”

In May 2012, a second grant of \$15,000 enabled GCAAR to continue and expand its Smart Growth focus by participating in a coalition of county officials, developers, businesses, organizations, planning officials, and transportation/transit groups advocating for a comprehensive mass transit plan. A key member of the coalition, GCAAR has been an early supporter of the county’s proposed 160-mile Rapid Transit Vehicle system that would serve areas not reached by the existing Metro Rail system.



GCAAR President Michael McGreevy explains how pressing the issue of Washington suburbs' notoriously heavy commuter traffic is to REALTORS<sup>®</sup>, as an industry – and as local residents. “Because transportation has an important role in most real estate and housing decisions, the development of mass transit is critical to the economic future of Montgomery County and will create the foundation for our county’s long term well-being. In addition, it is essential to easing the traffic burden on the communities’ roads. As REALTORS<sup>®</sup>,” he continues, “we promote the county’s quality of life and recognize that residential real estate located near public transportation is attractive to a growing number of buyers.”

Funds from the second grant were also used to create a magazine compiling all the material and data gathered at the Planned Development Information Sessions, as well as an in-depth article on Montgomery County’s proposed RTV system. Hard copies of *Smart Growth Montgomery County* were distributed to all GCAAR Maryland members with a cover-letter encouraging them to share it with colleagues, clients, and neighbors; the magazine is also available in an electronic format.

“We wanted to expand the benefit of all this information to our membership, and the response has been terrific,” says Ritsko-Warren, who notes that the association is using grant funds to develop webinars based on the materials, as well. And, recognizing a successful program when it develops one, GCAAR will continue offering Planned Development Information Sessions in other communities ripe for smart growth – by popular demand.

*To learn more about how the Greater Capital Area Association of REALTORS<sup>®</sup> is taking the lead on planned development in Montgomery County, Maryland, contact Vice President and Chief Operations Officer Amy Ritsko-Warren, at [awarren@gcaar.com](mailto:awarren@gcaar.com) or 301.590.8777.*



Left: Part of the second grant was used to create a magazine compiling key elements of the smart growth study and information gathered.

Lower Left: The White Flint area of North Bethesda, MD is a thriving mixed-use center with easy access to Metro and Rockville Pike.

Lower Right: Epad living concept is part of the plan

