

Protecting the Chesapeake Bay through Regional Growth Management Policy

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The Chesapeake Bay, a 4,400 square mile estuary within a 64,000 square mile watershed, is Maryland's most prominent geographic feature, defining both the culture and economy of the State. Due in part to the attractiveness of the Bay as an amenity and its economic value, a thriving regional economy is now attracting migrants at an unprecedented rate. Population forecasts made in the late 1980's have proven too conservative; Maryland's population is now expected to top six million by 2020. Combined with increases in population in the other states in the watershed, the impact of this growth on the Bay is profound.

New development, especially an auto-dependent pattern of large residential lots and decentralized employment centers, affects the Bay more profoundly than ever. Development reduces forests and disturbs the soil, and rain carries warm sediment-laden water into the Bay; nitrogen from residential septic systems is carried into the Bay by groundwater; and nitrogen from automobile exhaust settles in the Bay.

Acting on the responsibilities it assumed under the multi-state Chesapeake Bay Agreement of 1987, Maryland passed a law establishing for the first time an official State "growth policy." Maryland's growth policy controls all infrastructure decisions made by the State and is carried out in the comprehensive plans of the State's 178 counties and municipalities. The growth policy consists of seven goal statements calling for concentrated development, conservation of resources, the adoption of a Bay stewardship ethic, and economic development in planned growth areas.

For a variety of reasons, Maryland has recognized that successful growth management in a large rapid growing watershed requires a planning-based approach rather than simply adding another layer of State regulations. The role of the State is to establish general principles for local jurisdictions and then offer support and technical assistance as these principles are applied to actual sites. The challenge is to establish a dialogue in which local governments are equal partners and understand the contribution they make towards restoring a regional environmental resource.

Maryland's growth policy functions in the context of a multi-pronged approach to restore the health of the Bay. Teamed with aggressive enforcement of discharge limits, forest conservation, and land management scenarios for each the Bay's tributaries, Maryland hopes to assure both a cleaner Bay and a healthy economy.