

Frequently Asked Questions – With Answers

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Comments on land use can be sent via e-mail to the Planning Office at planning@pwcva.gov. Comments can also be sent to members of the [Planning Commission](#) and [Board of County Supervisors](#).

1) How does the 2040 Comprehensive Plan affect me? Why should I care?

As the population continues to grow, more development will occur. What you see now in Prince William County will look different in 20 years.

Farms could become subdivisions or parkland, commercial strip malls could be revitalized into mixed use communities with housing, and roads could be widened.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan identifies where and how existing land uses are expected to change by 2040.

The Board of County Supervisors has approved a long-range 2040 Comprehensive Plan to accommodate new development and shape how places will change over the next 20 or so years. Different chapters in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan were completed between 2017-2022.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan tells landowners and developers where urban, suburban, and rural land use is preferred by 2040. Specific planned uses defined in the plan include Commercial (COM), Industrial (I), Mixed Use (MU), Office Mixed Use (OMU), and Residential Neighborhoods (RN).

Some form of development is planned for all existing vacant parcels which are not designated for Parks and Open Space (POS) or Environmental Resources Protection Overlay (ERPO).

In some places the preferred land use pattern defined in the 2008 Comprehensive Plan was changed in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. In other places, no revisions were made.

The Comprehensive Plan also identifies what new transportation projects (roads, trails, transit) are planned to be completed by 2040. The specific projects identified in the 2040 Mobility Chapter will get prioritized for funding in future budgets and bond issues.

Note that the 2040 Comprehensive Plan is a *guideline* to shape development patterns. The Zoning Ordinance, not the Comprehensive Plan, is the legally binding document that constrains development options for each parcel.

2) Change is happening too fast. Can't we just freeze new development in Prince William County for a while, or even stop it?

No. No. No.

Population growth, driven by the desire of more people to live in Prince William County, is the basic trigger for building new houses/apartments, new schools, new retail stores and restaurants, new police/fire stations, etc.

There is no gate to close that would block people from moving into the county. There is no realistic option for government officials to prevent appropriate development needed to accommodate new residents.

Prince William County officials have the power to determine what is "appropriate development," what types of development will be authorized in different places.

For example, the Board of County Supervisors can authorize a gas station to be constructed at the corner of a subdivision - or determine that commercial development is not appropriate there and authorize just housing. Similarly, the Board of County Supervisors can determine if housing at that corner should be authorized only for single-family residences on quarter-acre lots, or if an apartment complex is appropriate there.

County officials also determine what public facilities to build in different places, such as roads, schools, libraries, and parks.

However, there is no option for blocking more people from moving into Prince William County. There is no option for blocking the economic stimulus for new development. Ignoring the needs of new residents is not realistic.

County officials have the authority to shape where growth will occur, but not to stop growth.

3) Will the 2040 Comprehensive Plan be reviewed/revised before 2040?

Yes, in small chunks as well as in a complete review/revision.

The Comprehensive Plan has flexibility. It is not engraved in stone, and is not a development straightjacket until the year 2040.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan can be modified each year through Comprehensive Plan Amendments (CPAs). The Board of County Supervisors can approve CPAs to adjust the long-range plan for specific parcels. The CPA process is initiated by landowners/developers when they request approval for a different development pattern than what is currently in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

For example, in 2022 the Planning Commission and the Board of County Supervisors approved a CPA to authorize the Digital Gateway project near Manassas National Battlefield Park. Revising the 2008 Comprehensive Plan for the Digital Gateway parcels established that it was

now county policy to authorize data centers on parcels previously planned for low-density residential development.

The entire long-range Comprehensive Plan, identifying future development patterns, is usually reviewed/revised roughly every 10 years. Chapters of the Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2008 were updated/replaced in a revision process that lasted five years between 2017-2022. A major review/revision of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan is likely in the early 2030's.

4) What is the role of the Planning Office, Planning Commission, and Board of County Supervisors in land use planning?

The Board of County Supervisors is ultimately responsible for land use decisions.

The Planning Office is part of County government. The County Executive, who reports to the Board of County Supervisors, has responsibility for managing that office.

The Planning Office processes applications for land use approvals. Administrative changes that do not require public involvement are handled directly between property owners and that office.

Land use changes that require public involvement (including CPAs, rezonings, Special Use Permits, Public Facility Reviews, and proffer amendments), must be approved by the Planning Commission. There are eight members on the Planning Commission, one for each magisterial district. Each Planning Commission member is appointed by the elected member of the Board of County Supervisors for that district.

The Planning Office prepares case files and briefing material for policy proposals and formal public hearings at the Planning Commission. In that process, the Planning Office circulates proposed land use changes submitted by landowners/developers to other county offices, collects feedback, and ultimately creates the official recommendation which the Planning Commission votes on.

The Planning Commission advises the BOCS, but the BOCS makes the final decision on applications. *(Public Facility Reviews are the exception. The Planning Commission makes the final decision. However, that decision can be appealed to the Board of County Supervisors.)*

Typically, applicants for a land use change that will generate public comment first engage in lengthy and detailed discussions with Planning Office staff, and also talk with Planning Commissioners and members of the Board of County Supervisors. Some applicants also make presentations to civic associations and community groups to identify concerns and negotiate potential mitigation measures, and gain useful feedback.

Filings for land use changes are public documents. They are posted by the Planning Office on the [Development Application Processing Schedule \(DAPS\) and Pending Planning Cases Interactive Map](#) for public review, while comments are gathered from other county offices and staff reports are prepared for decisions by the Planning Commission and Board of County Supervisors.

Residents who do not want to be surprised by a proposed land use change may check the DAPS regularly to see the latest filings, or attend civic association meetings where projects are

reviewed as early as possible. These meetings provide interaction between applicants, residents and county staff.

Public hearings on proposals before the Planning Commission and Board of County Supervisors include time for public comments. Verbal comments at a public hearing may be limited to three minutes, but there are no limits on e-mails sent to members of the Planning Commissioner and Board of County Supervisors,

5) What is the role of county vs. state officials in shaping where development will occur?

Virginia is a “Dillon rule” state, one where local governments have only the authorities granted by the General Assembly.

Since the Virginia legislature has granted county officials the authority to zone land and steer growth through the land use planning process, the eight elected members on the Prince William Board of County Supervisors – not Commonwealth of Virginia officials – will determine what types and how many dwelling units, stores, industrial facilities, office buildings, etc. will be authorized on specific parcels.

The Board of County Supervisors starts the land use planning process by first adopting a long-range Comprehensive Plan for the entire county. The Land Use Chapter in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan (adopted in December 2022) incorporated Small Area Plans that had previously been prepared for small portions of the county, and previously adopted by the supervisors.

The Comprehensive Plan indicates the type of development encouraged on every parcel within Prince William County by 2040. The Comprehensive Plan also identifies the planned density of authorized development. For example, a parcel could be planned for development of just one house on a 10-acre lot or for urban-level density with multi-story housing complexes.

URBAN COMMUNITIES	RURAL COMMUNITIES
<p>Intent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Residential and Commercial development with multimodal connectivity at or near transit. <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Activity Centers . Major Corridors <p>Primary Land Uses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Higher Density Residential . Commercial, Office, Civic 	<p>Intent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Maintain rural character and preserve natural and historic features <p>Location</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Hamlets . Villages . Clusters <p>Primary Land Uses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Agriculture/Agritourism . Forestry . Low density residential
	

6) What is the role of county vs. state officials in shaping where roads will be constructed?

County officials plan where new roads should be located and where existing roads should be expanded. However, the state still controls most funding for road construction and much of the funding for transit improvements.

Unlike land use, state officials are responsible for many decisions affecting mobility infrastructure. State officials and a regional organization, the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA), will make key decisions on when to fund most of the \$6 billion of proposed road projects listed in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Synchronizing the timing of building new houses and expanding mobility capacity is rarely accomplished. It is common for new housing to create new traffic congestion, until funding is obtained to respond to the increased demand.

Prince William County speeds up funding for high-priority road projects by using local tax revenue. Since 1988, voters have approved seven bond issues to spend \$911 million in local taxes to supplement state/regional funding for road projects.

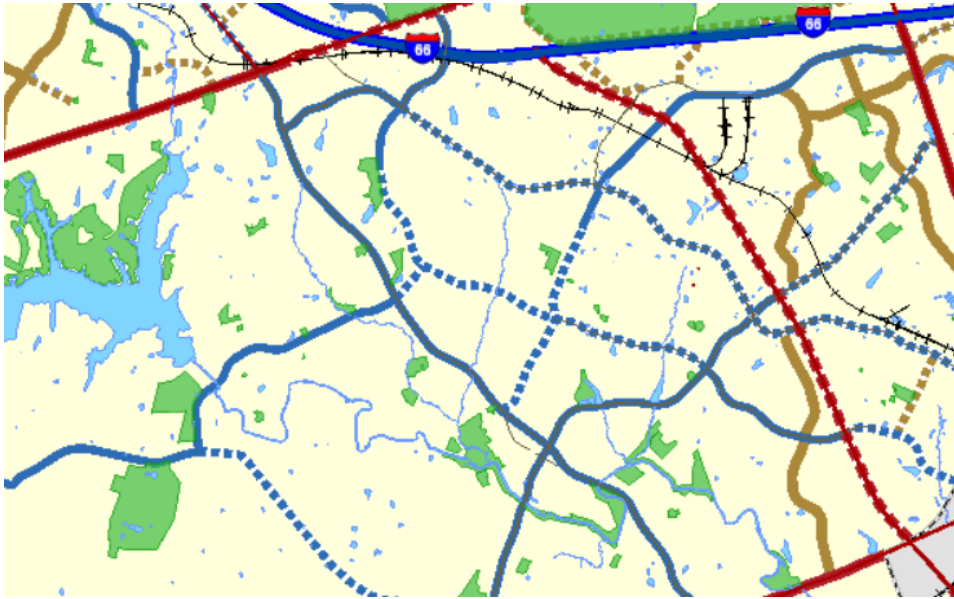
7) What are the differences between the 2021-24 Strategic Plan, 2040 Comprehensive Plan, Zoning Ordinance, the Subdivision Ordinance, Special Use Permit, and Design and Construction Manual (DCSM), and Building Permits?

The **Strategic Plan** is updated every four years after elections for the Board of County Supervisors, and the new Board approves the plan with its vision for the county. Policies and action strategies in the Strategic Plan are intended to provide a guide to county priorities for a four-year period.

The **Comprehensive Plan** is a long-range guide for the future growth, redevelopment, and preservation of the County as well as investments in future public infrastructure for the next 20 years. The County Executive uses the Comprehensive Plan to guide development of the annual county budget, particularly the Capital Improvements Program (CIP).

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan includes chapters with policies and action strategies for Land Use; Mobility; Housing; Utilities; Parks, Recreation and Tourism; Conservation/Preservation; Community Design; Community Education; and Safe and Secure Community.

The Land Use chapter includes a map identifying where different types of development are planned. The Mobility and Utilities chapters have maps showing the location of roads/trails/transit infrastructure and high-voltage power lines planned to be completed by 2040. The maps can also be viewed in the [County Mapper](#).



The **Zoning Ordinance** determines which uses are authorized for parcels located within the different zoning districts defined by the county, with details on acceptable building heights and how close structures can be built near property lines.

Zoning districts can separate land uses so, for example industrial activities are located far enough away to minimize impact on residential areas. Districts can also mix different types of land uses intentionally, so residential/retail/office uses are co-located in order to create a live-work-play community.

Zoning ordinances are unique in each jurisdiction. The Prince William County zoning ordinance does not have to define land uses that align with the districts in Manassas, Manassas Park, or surrounding counties. The four towns in Prince William County can plan for land uses that are inconsistent with Prince William County zoning districts adjacent to the town boundaries.

The **Subdivision Ordinance** describes how new neighborhoods are developed. The ordinance specifies requirements for developers to record plats showing the boundaries of individual parcels and locations of streets (after coordination with the Virginia Department of Transportation). Plats also identify location of easements for public utilities.

Site plans filed under the subdivision ordinance create “vested” rights. Once a site plan has been approved, the county can not restrict the authorized development by changing the zoning.

The **Design and Construction Manual (DCSM)** defines the requirements for site development plans and plats. Proffers and special use permit conditions must be reflected in site plans. Site plans must also show how a project will comply with requirements in the DCSM for stormwater management and erosion control, road design, water supply, buffers, and other details.

Building Permits are required to ensure construction complies with the requirements in the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code. Inspectors issue approvals for specific stages in construction, such as completing the building pad for the foundation, framing, plumbing, and electrical components.

8) What is “by right” development?

The Zoning Ordinance specifies what land uses are authorized within a zoning district. For example, a hotel or motel is authorized by right within an area zoned B-1 General Business District. No special county permit is required to construct a hotel there, though a site plan and building permit are still necessary for construction to start.

Similarly, one house per lot is authorized by right in the A-1 Agricultural District. Also authorized by right are accessory structures such as barns, sheds, and stables for bona fide agricultural uses.

9) Special Use Permits are a provision in the zoning ordinance to allow certain uses within a zoning district, but only after special approval by the Board of County Supervisors.

For example, restaurants and banks may be permitted uses within a commercial district, but installing drive-up windows may require a special use permit. The extra approval step allows nearby residents to share their perspective on whether a drive up window might create unacceptable traffic issues.

Within a zoning district, county officials must allow “by right” uses authorized in a zoning district. However, the Board of County Supervisors can reject a request for a special use permit.

10) What is a “pre-existing non-conforming use”?

Over time, elected officials change how parcels are zoned, and change the requirements for development within a zoning district. When those changes occur, an existing use may no longer match the authorized uses for the current zoning district.

Such pre-existing uses are “grandfathered” and - though inconsistent with the current zoning - allowed to continue.

For example, a house may sit on a lot created by a subdivision in the 1960’s. Today the parcel may be located in a B-1 General Business District. Residential dwellings are not authorized within that zoning district, but the pre-existing house does not need to be torn down. It can’t be replaced with a new house, but the old house is grandfathered in.

A mobile home park may be located in a Mixed Use District (MXD), but the density of the mobile home units may exceed what is authorized for that zoning district. Since the mobile home park was there before the zoning district, no units need to be removed in order to comply with the MXD density limits.

11) How can I find out how my house is designated in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan and the Zoning Ordinance? How do I find out what new transportation projects are included in the 2040 Mobility Chapter?

The easiest way is to check the [County Mapper](#). Prince William County has a guide to [Find My Zoning District](#).

This League of Women Voters site also has “How to Find the Long Range Land Use Designation (and More...) For a Place In the County Mapper.”

12) Who decides what will be built on a vacant parcel, or to replace existing development (even Manassas Mall)? When will the zoning on a particular parcel change, and how can I engage in that process?

Landowners determine when their property will be developed. If a landowner is not interested or financially prepared to change existing land use, then the existing uses on the parcel will not change. Prince William County plans in advance for future land use changes, but actual changes occur only when landowners are ready to act.

When a landowner is ready to change land use, they may discover a disconnect between planned uses as defined in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan or the Zoning Ordinance vs. the desired new use.

Almost all rezoning requests occur when landowners/developers have assembled at least initial funding and plans for developing a parcel, and they need zoning of a parcel to be revised in order to develop according to the new plans.

County residents do not need to wait for a rezoning request to appear on the Development Application Processing Schedule (DAPS) and Pending Planning Cases Interactive Map, or for signs to appear on the side of the road announcing a public hearing.

The sooner people get engaged in the decision process, the greater the flexibility in revising a development proposal.

Even before a Comprehensive Plan Amendment and/or rezoning request is submitted, people can talk to the landowner/developer and to elected officials about what development would be preferred on a parcel. Getting engaged with local civic associations creates another opportunity to exchange ideas and identify others who share common preferences for future development.

Residents can also talk to county staff, before or after a rezoning request is filed, to discover the staff perspective and to communicate one's preferences.

There are two formal opportunities to speak, during the public hearings held by the Planning Commission and the Board of County Supervisors. Typically, landowners/developers schedule those hearings with Planning Office staff only after calculating that a project will be approved.

If a person waits until the public hearing stage to express their opinion, they have the lowest probability of affecting the final decision.

13) When will the 2040 Comprehensive Plan be revised, and how can I engage in that process?

The last chapters of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan were adopted in 2022. The entire plan is not likely to undergo a complete review/revision for another decade, but Comprehensive Plan Amendments (CPAs) are likely to be submitted almost every year.

CPAs are normally requested by landowners/developers. However, the Board of County Supervisors may initiate a CPA on its own. One possibility is that the Community Energy and Sustainability Master Plan, being developed by the county's Sustainability Office in 2023, may reveal new policies and action strategies are required in order to meet the county's adopted target for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 to 50% of the 2005 level.

14) What are “Transects”?

Transect Zones define places intended to have a consistent scale of density and intensity of development. “Density” refers to the average number of people per acre. “Intensity” describes the amount of constructed building volume per acre. Density focuses on the number of people on a parcel, and intensity focuses on the type of buildings at a site.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan proposes six different types of walkable, live-work-play communities with reduced traffic congestion. The most dense/intense development areas are classified as T-6 zones, “Urban Town Center.” Areas intended to be developed at lower levels of population density and building intensity range from T-5 “Town Center” to T-1B “Hamlet” transects.

Prince William County adopted the concept of Transect Zones from the [description of multimodal centers](#) provided by Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. “Multimodal” refers to the different options of travel, including bus/rail transit and walking/biking as well as cars.

Multimodal centers typically have a similar pattern of higher density in the center that tapers off as you move toward the edges. The area within the primary walkshed, which can be approximated by a quarter-mile radius, corresponds to a 5-minute walk. The center usually has higher densities than those in the secondary walkshed, which corresponds to a 10-minute walk.

	T-1B Hamlet	T-1C Village	T-3 Neighborhood	T-4 Community	T-5 Town Center	T-6 Urban Town Center
Primary Uses	Single Family Detached Agribusiness Retail & Retail Service	Single Family Detached Retail & Retail Service	Single Family Detached Single Family Attached Multi-Family Residential Retail & Retail Service Office Institutional	Single Family Attached Multi-Family Residential Retail & Retail Service Office Institutional Hotel	Multifamily Residential Retail & Retail Service Office Institutional Structured Parking	

15) What is a “proffer,” and how do they affect new development?

A proffer is a voluntary commitment from a landowner or developer to reduce or eliminate the impact of new development on neighboring properties and the county. Typically, landowners/developer proffers are based on the county’s [Rezoning/Proffer Amendment Fee Schedule](#).

The county is prohibited from negotiating for a proffer in exchange for approval of a rezoning.