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Developers see culture shift in Frederick County's business approach by [Katherine Heerbrandt](#)
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Frederick County's new motto, "Open for Business," sets off alarm bells for some, while others offer high praise.

But although the barbs and accolades fly, it's too soon to tell whether the business-friendly focus adopted by Frederick's Board of County Commissioners in 2011 will have the intended effect of economic growth and lower taxes, said board President Blaine R. Young (R). Although he cannot name any specific projects on the horizon because of the confidential nature of negotiations, he said there is serious interest from companies that want to come to Frederick, including one that might bring 400 jobs to the county.

"Success won't happen overnight, but feedback is positive, and the phones are ringing off the hook," Young said. "People know Frederick wants your business and will get you through the process."

Helen Riddle, the county's acting director of economic development, said the county has a lot of irons in the fire, but offered no more details.

Four members of Frederick's Board of County Commissioners, including Young, promised big changes in county government's response to business development during the 2010 campaign. Commissioners Kirby Delauter, Billy Shreve and Paul Smith, along with Young, developed an evolving list of more than 200 changes to county land-use policies and regulations. They lowered fees for construction related permits and inspections, handed inspection duties to contractors, and began returning zoning designations to landowners who thought their properties had lost value.

Overall, those in favor of the changes said the difference is more of a cultural shift, a willingness on the part of county government to work with the business and development communities.

"The biggest change that we see is that the commissioners are actively seeking feedback from local businesses to find how to help all business in Frederick County and making positive changes where ever possible," said Ric Adams, director of the Frederick County Chamber of Commerce.

Between 2007 and 2011, the county issued an average of 673 commercial and industrial permits annually, with a peak of 724 in 2008. The number of permits issued dropped off in 2009 to 622 , and picked up in 2010, the last year of the Jan H. Gardner board, rising to 681. In 2011, the first year of Young's term, the county issued 666 permits.

Opponents decry the march toward irresponsible development that will exacerbate traffic congestion, crowd classrooms, pollute waterways, swallow diminishing farmland, and put the burden of paying for growth on the shoulders of existing taxpayers.

“Just because they won an election doesn’t give them a mandate, and doesn’t mean that they are giving people what they want,” said Kai Hagen, former commissioner and director of Envision Frederick, an advocacy group for quality of life issues.

Hagen points to Republican victories in other states, such as Maine and Wisconsin, where voters are having a bad case of buyer’s remorse. Ultimately, he said, the commissioners’ policies might attract attention and bring in some business, but companies looking for new homes are not always drawn in by the types of initiatives put forward by the Young board.

“It is clear from evidence around the country that businesses who can locate where they want to and who provide good paying jobs aren’t picking places with most generous land use and zoning policies,” Hagen said.

Supporters say doing business in the county was so convoluted and time consuming, that builders and developers were bypassing Frederick for more friendly, neighboring counties and states, such as Washington County, Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Frederick County was missing out on much needed revenue sources, they say.

The driving factor in the commissioners making changes is the failing economy. Federal and state budget cuts are putting unprecedented pressures on local governments to raise revenues, according to Mark Fries, development consultant with Rodgers Consulting.

“Developers are no longer the problem, they are the solution,” Fries said. His company is working on housing developments in Urbana and on Frederick city’s annexed land along U.S. 15.

Fries does not buy the argument that residential development does not pay for itself, given the rise of impact fees and the real estate taxes on new homes. To Fries, and others, the biggest — and so far best — change, has been an attitude adjustment. Instead of making people jump through regulatory hoops and putting up barriers to development, the government has asked what it can do to help.

A change in the county’s approach to development was No. 1 on the Frederick County Builders’ Association’s Land Use Council’s wish list, according to land-use attorney Bruce Dean, president of the council.

“Frederick County was known as the most unfriendly county in the most unfriendly state,” he said. The naysayers who say commissioners are moving too fast must realize that Young’s board has a lot to do in a short amount of time to undo 12 years of damage ...” Dean said.

Fries agreed.

“There was far too much polarization on the issue of growth, and much of that came from [former Commissioner] Lennie Thompson,” he said.

Thompson, who served three terms from 1998 to 2010, said the county did not have the resources to support the fallout from new residential development.

“Primarily it was transportation,” he said. “Nobody was standing there with check in hand. [Landowners and developers] were unwilling to open their wallets as wide as their mouths ... everybody wants improvements, no one wants to pay for it and we zoned the county accordingly.”

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