

**Recommendations of the
Land Use Information Accessibility Advisory Group
December 22, 2006**

I. Introduction

On January 23, 2006 upon the motion of Chairman Connolly, the Board of Supervisors established the Fairfax County Land Use Information Accessibility Advisory Group (“Advisory Group”). Membership nominations were completed at the May 1, 2006, Board meeting. The purpose of the Advisory Group was to review how land planning and development information is currently made available to the public, to make recommendations for accessibility improvements, and to develop a high level plan of action. This report contains the Advisory Group’s recommendations.

The Advisory Group recommends that the County embraces and builds towards the following short and long term vision for land use information. The principles in Section II will help maximize Fairfax County’s long tradition of public involvement in the land use review and approvals processes, and encourage the continuing modernization of information technologies in Fairfax County’s land use review and approval processes. The recommendations and improvements in Section III are intended to be designed and implemented over a number of years and reflect the general consensus of the Advisory Group based upon its view of the demand and need for such improvements. The target stakeholder audience includes County staff, novice citizens, active land use citizens, developers, property owners, and others with an interest in knowing more about proposed and ongoing land planning and development activities.

The Advisory Group appreciates the responsiveness that County staff has provided for this initiative. In addition, the Advisory Group recognizes several significant improvements that County staff has already implemented since the inception of this Board request, including:

- New web page design to reorganize and consolidate the land planning and development information (<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/living/landuse/>)
- New ability to search the Land Development System using a County address to see all nearby land planning and development cases (on a map or by listing, with drill down capability; <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ldsnet/>)
- New ability to search the Land Development System by Magisterial District to see area land planning and development cases (on a map with drill down capability; <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ldsnet/>)
- New business process improvements and system enhancements to the Master Address Repository (MAR) as it becomes the new system of record for parcel addressing in the County (on the Infoweb).

The Advisory Group encourages the County to embrace the concept of continual innovative and incremental improvements as well as longer-term larger improvements as changes in business processes and technology permit. The Advisory Group also strongly recommends that the Board provide consistent funding and sufficient resources to implement these recommendations as well as to sustain ongoing improvements.

II. Twelve Guiding Principles for Fairfax County Land Use Information

1. Make land use information publicly available and accessible at the earliest opportunity, at the greatest depth feasible, and in a consistent manner (for example, when land use information is first received by the County and/or entered into a County database).
2. Use geocoding standards developed by GIS across all County databases and land planning systems, and electronic development files and documents.
3. Collect and manage information so that it can be accessed from multiple entry points:
 - By geographic location, such as a specific address, a parcel ID number, a citizen or civic association (if available), and/or a relevant land area
 - By stages or steps in the land use approval process (e.g., request for permit, request for rezoning, etc.).
4. Make all public land use information easy to find, including:
 - Land use information developed by County agencies, and
 - Land use information developed by others and submitted to a County agency as part of a County land use approval process.
5. Ensure consistency and user friendliness across all web pages and across all agencies of the County.
6. Create standard report forms to allow searches across projects and aggregation of those data for use by County citizens.
7. Make sure that information systems and any changes made to them are open and scalable so future needs can be addressed.
8. Tailor land use pages to meet the needs of major user types (potentially affected area residents, public officials, developers, and other interested parties), and provide information as early as possible about:
 - Comprehensive Plan land use proposals in user defined areas or neighborhoods
 - Rezoning requests
 - Macro-scale land use data, approvals, and plans
 - Permit approvals (*In this context, permit approvals would include projects with exterior modifications to a structure or land disturbance activities, such as new homes and additions, etc. but would not include permits for interior alterations and modifications such as replacement equipment and new closets, etc.*).
9. Require external land planners and developers to submit land use application information to the County via electronic files using geocoding standards. Developers should also be encouraged to utilize 3D modeling and other visualization technology for larger and more complex land developments. These visualizations should be integrated with data and standards made available through the County's GIS program.
10. Make land use information accessible to citizens with a range of access to tools and resources, including users with no or limited access to the Internet.
11. Establish procedures and provide resources to keep land use information as timely and accurate as possible.
12. Investigate ways to increase the dialog and information sharing among all land use stakeholders.

III. Recommended Improvements for Fairfax County Land Use Information

1. **Expanded Application of Land Use Information Tools.** The Advisory Group applauds County staff for the recent major improvements to LDSNet, My Neighborhood, GIS, and other information tools designed to make land use information more readily available. These tools demonstrate the value of adding spatial and location data and functionality to land use information retrieval. The improvements are a major first step toward fulfilling the recommendations outlined in this report.

In the future, the Advisory Group recommends development of a more integrated and intuitive “front end” web page or portal or repository that enables users to go to one location and search for land planning and development information relevant to their inquiry location (such as address or parcel and the surrounding area). Furthermore, the Advisory Group recommends further integration of these and other land data sources such as the Courts Automated Retrieval System (CARS), the Fairfax Inspection Database Online (FIDO) system that contains permits and inspections information, the DTA IAS system which contains real estate parcel information, and other related systems. Expansion of the My Neighborhood capabilities combined with a data warehouse may be a good strategy to help achieve this. The County should consider providing more land use data that can be imported by a constituent into their own spreadsheet or another program for further analysis. The Advisory Group also requests that the County investigate how much more control of web page display could be provided to constituents. For citizens without ready access to the Internet, the Group recommends that the County continues to provide and enhance services such as Cris kiosks, public access PCs in facilities such as libraries, and the Fairfax Access Center at the South County Center – and maintain walk-up and call-in help resources for land use information currently in place to provide information to citizens who do not use a computer or the Internet.

2. **Further Integration of GIS into all County Land Use Information Systems.** The full complement of GIS tools and layers and map displays should be integrated fully into all County Land Use Information systems, as demonstrated through the new My Neighborhood service. The County should use geocoding standards approved by the GIS department in every County database and electronic document. This includes at least one set of usable geo-coordinates for land development permits, tax maps, plats, site plans, etc. For example, much of the guidance in the Area Plans portion of the Comprehensive Plan should be reorganized to incorporate geo-coordinates over time to meet this requirement so that it can become more useful to citizens seeking Plan information about specific areas and properties. (*priority recommendation*)
3. **Land Use Public Hearing Information.** For land use cases involving a public hearing the County should make land use information currently provided in the hard copy staff report, including critical pieces of information such as proffers, development plans and affidavits, available electronically. The County should develop a framework, perhaps a single web-based portal, through which the public can access this information regardless of whether it is produced and maintained by County staff (e.g., staff analysis of the application) or by applicants (e.g., justifications, proffers, development plans, affidavits, etc.). The Advisory Group also encourages research on the financial and practical viability of using this framework to encourage applications subject to a public hearing to utilize available visualization technologies to show how the proposed development would fit into the fabric of its adjacent neighborhoods and the existing environment, particularly for larger applications. (*priority recommendation*)

4. **Notification Process Above & Beyond State and Ordinance Requirements.** Fairfax County should study how to develop a process to allow interested citizens to be notified via email, or via another 'push' technology, of land use actions within a user-specified distance of a County address and according to certain categories of proposed land use. This would include activities such as: the submission of permit requests, rezonings, special exceptions, site and subdivision plans, PFM amendments, Comprehensive Plan changes, appeals, and other land use actions. This should include the ability to electronically draw a circle around a land use action or plan or development and have notifications sent to nearby stakeholders. This study should focus on which technologies would be most useful and also consider a user-friendly process for identifying and implementing thresholds about what information is sought by the user to provide the full complement of desired information without information overload. RSS (really simple syndication) could be utilized to notify citizens who have registered to receive land use updates. Other ideas would be podcasting of relevant land development information, and notification via non-electronic means like post cards. *(priority recommendation)*
5. **Improve Access to Site-Specific Land Use History.** Fairfax County should continue its efforts through LDSNet and My Neighborhood to integrate land use approval information on specific sites, and to improve the accessibility of site-specific land use histories.
6. **Electronic File Submission and Review.** Given that nearly all land use information is now produced electronically, Fairfax County should continue to update County land use review processes to facilitate electronic file submission and review using County standards. Submitted text file documents should include the affected parcel (tax) identifiers and addresses (if available). Submitted plans and plats should be in Virginia Coordinate System (VCS) 83 and tied to the county control network. Developers should also be encouraged to utilize 3D modeling and/or other visualization technology for larger and more complex land developments. These visualizations should also be in VCS 83 and be integrated with data and standards made available through the County's GIS program. Document security, version control, and paper backup issues also need to be addressed. The Advisory Group recognizes that such process changes need to be prioritized for implementation over several years, and recommends that County staff develop a prioritized project list of land use processes to move towards electronic file submission and review during 2007.
7. **Citizens and contractors requesting permits should be able to file electronically and utilize address or other information already on file with the County.** Work flows should be modified to take advantage of information already on file and to limit the creation of unnecessary paper. An applicant for land use projects, for instance, should be able to retrieve from the County all tax, fire, easement, flood, use restrictions, etc., information available electronically in the County that applies to that site.
8. **Land Use Orientation Page and Activity Calendar.** The Advisory Group recommends that the County develop a single web page to provide users with an orientation to the Fairfax County land use approval processes and to current information on upcoming land use public meetings and public hearings. This primer page should provide links to common land use inquiries or actions (e.g., how to apply for a building permit) and also contain a link to a glossary of common land use terms. Further, all search results obtained by users of the portal should be hyperlinked back to the relevant explanations and definitions. The calendar should be inclusive of all land development activity, including BOS, PC, and BZA public hearings and meetings, and

the existence of such a calendar should be publicized in public service announcements (e.g., on Channel 16).

9. ***Verbatim Excerpts and/or Viewable Proceedings of Planning Commission Decision Discussions Should be Available Online.*** The Board of Supervisors currently receives copies of transcripts of Planning Commission decisions prior to voting on land use cases. These verbatims should be placed online prior to the scheduled BOS hearing. Also, Planning Commission meetings should be made available as Video on Demand, as are Board of Supervisors meetings and numerous other Channel 16 highlights (see <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/cable/channel16/vod.htm>). Fairfax County should investigate the possibility of allowing a constituent to download any on-demand video, such as a Planning Commission hearing. Google video could possibly be utilized to archive these hearings while still allowing them to be accessible.
10. ***Collection of Approved Plans and Visualization of Community-Wide Development.*** Fairfax County should collect an electronic version of approved development plans and build an electronic library to facilitate easy retrieval of approved plans. These electronic files should be collected using standards established by GIS so that they can be more easily aggregated to visualize communities of the future. For selective high priority planning exercises focusing on a specific area, Fairfax County should investigate retroactively digitizing approved development plans to visualize the impact of approved unbuilt projects. The Advisory Group recognizes the expense of retroactively digitizing all hard copy files and encourages the Board of Supervisors to be selective in digitizing the hundreds of thousands of hard copy plans and land use records in County filing cabinets. In the future, County imagery will also need to be upgraded to support three-dimensional analyses and fully implement this recommendation.
11. ***Create New GIS Overlays.*** The Advisory Group recommends more detailed GIS layers and spatial presentations for documents such as the Comprehensive Plan, a document that should evolve into a digital Comprehensive Plan model with GIS layers showing the approved plan with options and alternatives (including maximum residential and commercial densities), and a layer showing existing development on properties concurrently with Comprehensive Plan recommendations. The digital evolution of the Comprehensive Plan will be a major long-term undertaking and will require the Board to allocate resources accordingly.
12. ***Coordination within the County.*** The County should assure all public safety agencies are able to acquire and use current and proposed electronic land use data immediately, and that these data are available on the County portal where prudent. This information may be “pushed” to residents and commercial entities in specific areas. A unified dictionary of land use terms should be developed and used across all County agencies.
 - All County inspectors (tax, engineering, fire, police, etc.) should take spatially-referenced and dated photography in a manner consistent with the needs of all County agencies. This photography should be related to addresses or parcel IDs in the County in a digital repository. The County should create a database to store spatially referenced and dated data for access across all agencies and, where appropriate, the public.
 - The Advisory Group encourages the County to provide more information about County-related land development projects, such as those of the Park Authority, Water Authority, and FCPS.

- The Advisory Group encourages the County to move forward with the PRODDS proffer tracking and status reporting initiative.
13. **Coordination with Other Jurisdictions.** The Advisory Group recommends that County staff stay in close contact with other jurisdictions and other agencies (e.g. VDOT) in an effort to make land use information more accessible, to learn about new techniques and technologies, to learn from their experience, and to participate in collaborative initiatives that help bring about the recommendations in this report.
 14. **Outreach to County Stakeholders such as Citizens and Businesses.** The County should use available land use information and technologies to improve its conversation with and among citizens about land use. Fairfax County should coordinate with private media to provide easier public access to land use information such as proposed plan amendments, zoning applications and site plans. Existing outreach efforts by the Office of Public Affairs and the Planning Commission (e.g., Planning Commission Roundtable) are encouraged, as is the periodic sponsorship of workshops and forums on land use topics of general interest. These outreach activities should take advantage of Internet-based technologies to involve the largest possible number of interested Fairfax County stakeholders. The Advisory Group discussed the possibility of a portal for regional land information hosted by a non-County commercial or private sector organization. The portal should include a coordinated participation of local Architectural/Engineering and consulting firms that make frequent submissions for plan review purposes, and other submissions that would support the development of the electronic submission process.
 15. **Outreach to Civic and Homeowner Associations.** The County should encourage organizations like the Federation of Citizen Associations, District Councils, and larger citizen associations to work closely with Board member offices to collect information about which addresses and parcels are associated with each particular civic or homeowner association. An online function to allow and encourage citizen association data entry and updates should be provided to maximize the ability of Board member offices to communicate with those potentially affected by land use proposals. Supervisors could highlight the desire to compile and maintain current information from Associations in their newsletters. As information about Association addresses and/or parcel IDs is captured, association information could be displayed through My Neighborhood. Some members of the Advisory Group also felt that this initiative should capture association covenants information, but this topic is a candidate for a future focus group before a recommendation is made.
 16. **Ongoing Focus Groups.** Some type of periodic ongoing advisory group should meet to monitor progress and make further recommendations. This should be aligned with the Planning Commission, and it could include periodic meetings with members of the recently initiated LDSNet focus group. This is a small group of citizens that periodically meets with land development programmer/analysts to provide suggestions about the LDSNet system and help test subsequent enhancements and modifications.
 17. **Enhancements to the Board Auditorium.** Enhance the capability for speakers and staff to use electronic media presentations and GIS displays in the Auditorium. Provide a monitor, mouse and keyboard at the podium so presenters can address the Board or Commission or BZA directly without having to step back to look at the big screen. Also provide Board, Commission and BZA members with web access from the dais to quickly retrieve information such as the Zoning Ordinance, the Comprehensive Plan, GIS maps, and aerial photography.

Attachment A

Land Use Information Accessibility Advisory Group

Primary Participants (Advisory Group plus County Staff)

Advisory Group Members

- *Walter Alcorn, Chairman* *Planning Commission*
- *Anne Kanter* *IT Policy Advisory Committee (ITPAC)*
- *David Kochendarfer* *Sully District*
- *Linus Upson* *Providence District*
- *David Dale* *Mount Vernon District*
- *James Katchem* *Federation of Citizen Associations*
- *Allison Anderson* *EQAC*
- *John Lundgren* *NVBIA*
- *Judy Anderson* *League of Women Voters*

Other Constituent Participants

- *Sheldon W. Hoenig*
- *Fran Wallingford*
- *Jody Bennett*

County Staff

- *Dave Molchany* *Deputy County Executive*
- *Gordon Jarratt* *DIT*
- *Tom Conry* *DIT/GIS*
- *Mike Liddle* *DIT/GIS*
- *Woodrow Bellamy* *DIT/Land Systems*
- *Greg Scott* *DIT/Internet*
- *Michelle Brickner* *DPWES*
- *Steve Garnier* *DPWES*
- *Barbara Byron* *DPZ*
- *Fred Selden* *DPZ*
- *Donna McNeally* *DPZ*
- *Jeanne Wright* *DIT/Land Systems*
- *Linda Boaz* *DIT/Land Systems*
- *Cathy Lemmon* *OPA*

Attachment B

Land Use Information Accessibility Advisory Group

Acronyms and Systems Glossary

- **BOS** *Board of Supervisors*
- **BZA** *Board of Zoning Appeals*
- **FIDO** *Fairfax Inspections Database Online (permitting, inspections, and complaints information for DPWES, DPZ, Fire Prevention, and Health; portions still under development in 2007)*
- **GIS** *Geographical Information Systems and Mapping*
- **Infoweb** *The Intranet (internal internet for County-networked PCs)*
- **LDSNet** *Land Development Information System (on the Internet)*
- **MAR** *Master Parcel Address Repository*
- **My Neighborhood** *GIS-based information system with a myriad of information relevant to each address or in the County*
- **PAWS** *Plans and Waivers System (DPWES)*
- **PC** *Planning Commission*
- **PFM** *Public Facilities Manual*
- **Podcast** *Multimedia files distributed by a subscription to an Internet feed for playback on mobile devices or personal computers*
- **PRODDS** *Proffer Status and Tracking Database project*
- **RSS** *Really Simple Syndication, a family of “web feed” formats to publish frequently updated pages (such as news feeds or web logs)*
- **ZAPS** *Zoning and Planning System (DPZ)*