



2011 Comprehensive Plan Op-Ed

By Knox van Nagell, 4/29/11

Best estimates say that an additional 60,000 people will call Lexington home by 2030. So one of the central questions facing our community is not if we grow, but how we grow—and can we do it in a way that positions our built, natural, and social environments for success in today’s rapidly changing world?

National and local market studies shed light on this complex issue. Surprisingly, our demographics are changing along with our housing preferences—determining how our community will look and function in the future.

Recently, the NY Times reported that today’s typical homebuyers have smaller families—and in turn they want smaller, denser, and more inter-connected living environments.

“75 percent of home buyers over the next 15 years will have childless households... There is a historic reversal of home-buying demand away from suburban and rural areas to cities and inner ring suburbs that are more walkable than drivable...[It] is projected [there will be] a nationwide surplus of 22 million suburban homes...by 2025.”¹

Nationally, the single-family detached home in the burbs has become less and less the housing unit of choice, when other options are available and affordable. And locally, Lexington-Fayette County is experiencing a similar transformation.

A year-and-a half ago, LFUCG completed—with the help of several national and local real estate planning firms—a Housing Market Study that identified our demographic trends, available land for development, and preferred housing types and needs over the next twenty years.

The study’s major recommendations and related findings were:

1. To immediately address Lexington-Fayette County’s shortage of quality housing, for those with the most moderate incomes.
 - Our housing market is grossly undersupplied for sale product below \$85k, and for rental product below \$500/mo.
2. To plan for longer-term growth using higher density product—such as condominiums, town homes, and small-lot single family units—in all areas within Lexington-Fayette County’s Urban Service Boundary.
 - There are roughly 12,750 acres inside the USB potentially available for re-development, contingent on community planning and policy decisions. This number includes approximately 6,700 acres identified by the LFUCG Division of Planning as vacant inside the Urban Service Boundary.
3. Create regulations that will facilitate well-designed, higher density mixed-use development for those in Lexington seeking this housing product.

¹ In the Region-Housing Inventories on the Rise, The New York Times, December 2008



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- 40% of Lexington's current market prefers to live in an "infill product" inside New Circle Road. This percentage is growing, as market perceptions evolve, transportation costs increase, and good infill product is built.
- Nearly 70% of Lexington homes contain just one or two persons.
- In 2007, roughly 10% of Lexington's population was aged 65 years or older. This number will continue to grow in the future, making "aging in place" an increasing market in Lexington- Fayette County.²

In light of these facts, it's apparent that Fayette County is primed for an innovative growth model—one that incentivizes developers to build well-designed, mixed-use, and affordable housing units in our urban core and suburbs, while preserving our finite Bluegrass landscape on the perimeter for its branding, quality of life, and economic development value.

To accomplish this kind of built-environment, the study identified several needed LFUCG initiatives including supporting local affordable housing programs, mixed-use districts with architectural guidelines, and open space requirements.

Pointedly, the study also revealed that Lexington's potential redevelopment areas could accommodate up to approximately 14,500 new residential units under current land-use plans—and yet we will likely need 19,800 new residential units by 2030. Therefore, increased density, and regional partnerships are key strategies in satisfying our long-term growth demands.

But will leadership step up to the plate? Can we meaningfully respond to what our market is telling us, and implement targeted affordable housing and infill policies that make it easier for developers to do the right thing, without compromising our cityscape and iconic Bluegrass brand?

Last week, Mayor Gray along with Vice Mayor Gorton, members of Council, Planning Commissioners, and leaders in the private sector stood together and announced that no expansion of our Urban Services Area was necessary during the upcoming Comprehensive Plan Update process.

This step is a very, very big deal.

The Comprehensive Plan is the blueprint of future growth for Lexington-Fayette County—governing the zoning and development of our city. Historically the question whether to expand our city limits into more farmland has been the most controversial and consuming issue of the process.

With Lexington's city limits remaining unchanged, we will have an unprecedented opening to re-focus our lens and leverage both our incredible Bluegrass landscape and special built environments to innovatively accommodate our future growth needs.

This strategy, if aggressively and responsibly pursued, will not only improve our economy but our environment—putting Lexington on the map as a national and international destination.

Since 2006, The Fayette Alliance has been committed to this vision. As Lexington's only land-use

² Lexington's Aging in Place Initiative, LFUCG, October 31 2008.



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advocacy group dedicated to promoting a sustainable growth strategy that benefits all of us, we've been hard at work.

By educating and lobbying local government about the need and importance of farmland preservation, responsible and innovative development, and improved infrastructure—we've ushered over 45 major land-use policies into law...positively impacting the very building blocks of our community. Please visit www.fayettealliance.com to learn more.

Needless to say, we look forward to working with city hall and our various community partners like Progress Lexington to make Lexington a world-class city in a world-class Bluegrass landscape.

Using a collaborative approach, the Comprehensive Plan update is the perfect opportunity to make this happen using various planning tools like small-area planning, land-use, and zoning recommendations. In fact, Lexingtonians called for such a chance in Destination 2040:

We will protect and promote the signature rural landscape...continue the momentum to bring about a truly vibrant downtown, and ensure that all urban and suburban neighborhoods flourish. Acknowledging that the future will bring growth in population...[W]e will use proactive, cooperative regional planning to address change...while appropriately balancing the community's needs.

While this is a tall order, we're up to the challenge.

As proven by Dr. Richard Florida in Rise of the Creative Class and countless other experts, we cannot afford to look the other way and advance poorly designed "sprawl" development because it not only fails our demographic market, but our natural, social, and economic promise.

The Comprehensive Plan Update is the time for action, and let's started. Together we can leave our mark, and seize this incredible opportunity for our town, our farms, and our future. Please send me your hopes and dreams for Lexington at director@fayettealliance.com.