

# WABASH COLLEGE

Wabash Democracy & Public Discourse Initiative

## “Planning for Montgomery County’s Future”

*Southmont High School  
April 10, 2018*

### Post-Deliberation Report

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This report will be available online at:  
<https://www.wabash.edu/plus/democracy>

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## Event Overview

In November 2017, the Montgomery County Commissioners voted in favor of a resolution to develop a comprehensive plan for the county. The Commissioners applied for a \$50,000 grant from the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) to help fund this plan. Currently, Montgomery County is one of 11 counties in Indiana without a comprehensive plan in place, and is the only such county without comprehensive planning that includes a city—Crawfordsville—with its own zoning ordinances.

A comprehensive plan is essentially an overarching framework that seeks to define the character, foundation, and direction of a community. It accounts for the perspectives of residents, businesses, and development experts in spelling out the community's priorities: *What does it want to preserve? How does it want to change and/or grow?* And, in broad terms, it suggests appropriate solutions for the community to pursue those priorities.

From a political perspective, comprehensive plans can be a source of controversy because they are one of the requirements a community must satisfy to move forward with land use regulation such as zoning. It is important to note that comprehensive plans—**by themselves**—have no force of law. Even if an Indiana community applies for an OCRA grant and commissions a comprehensive plan, and ultimately approves the plan that is produced, it must take further steps before moving forward with land use regulation. There have been communities that have adopted comprehensive plans and have opted not to enact zoning ordinances—in other words, there are **no guarantees** as how Montgomery County might approach land use regulation after approving a comprehensive plan.

Planning and zoning involve a complex series of legal, economic, and ideological considerations—and that's **before** one even gets into the details of zoning decisions. There are many valid perspectives as to how a community should evaluate its wants and needs in the, how it should weigh competing interests, and how it should view the proper role of local government in balancing the collective “good” against the property rights of the individual.

## Event Information

The Wabash Democracy & Public Discourse (WDPD) initiative formed a project team to address local planning and zoning in Fall 2017. Wabash College Democracy Fellows researched the topic from abstract and ideological perspectives, explored the specific constraints of planning and zoning in Indiana, and conducted dozens of interviews and focus groups with community stakeholders in and around Montgomery County.

These preliminary efforts led to the development of a community conversation on April 10, 2018. Titled “Planning for Montgomery County’s Future,” this open-to-the-public event sought to bring together various perspectives regarding land use and planning in Montgomery County. Additionally, it represented an opportunity for residents to express their views in a forum arranged by a neutral broker. While stakeholders have long had the

opportunity to speak at public meetings, WDPD's focus groups revealed that many residents were skeptical of local government officials. Finally, the community conversation was designed to explore residents' foundational priorities—setting aside more-extant policy controversies in order to better understand the values, beliefs, and attitudes that influence public opinion on matters of planning and zoning.

The event was held at Southmont High School in Crawfordsville, Indiana, and lasted from 6:30 p.m. until approximately 8:00 p.m. Montgomery County officials, residents, experts, and other stakeholders participated. In total, more than 50 stakeholders from the Montgomery County community participated in the conversation. To aid in the deliberation, each attendee received a participation guide that outlined the plan and purpose of each part of the conversation. Participants were encouraged to follow along with their guide, take notes, and make additions where they saw fit. The first page of the participant guide contained an information page that provided background information on land usage and planning in Montgomery County. The first page of the guide also outlined the two-pronged nature of the conversation. Before starting the discussion, a Democracy Fellow at each table reiterated to the participants that they must remain respectful of opposing opinions and allow all viewpoints to be presented and heard at the table.

Democracy Fellow Michael Krutz '18 opened the event by introducing WDPD, providing background on the project, and introducing the practice of deliberative conversation and the ground rules that would guide the conversations. Based on WDPD's research the conversation was split into two main components. Part 1 of the conversation aimed to bring forth the strengths and weaknesses of the Montgomery County Community. To begin the discussion, Democracy Fellows at each table presented the question, "How do we identify Montgomery County?" or "What would you say if you were trying to sell the County to someone?" to encourage participants to think about the strengths of their community. With this question, Fellows asked participants to refer to the facts and figures about the County presented in the bottom section of the participant guide. Fellows also encouraged participants to refer to the summary on the left side of their guides to ensure that participants brainstormed all aspects of Montgomery County.

Once the conversation began and participants shared various ideas on the table, Fellows asked them to identify the top three strengths of Montgomery County. With the top three strengths of the community laid out, the Fellows repeated the same process, but this time, to gauge information on improvement areas in Montgomery County. They reiterated to the participants that in this phase too they should consider all aspects of the county and respect diverse perspectives. The Fellows first presented the question, "What would you avoid talking about if you were trying to sell Montgomery County?" and other pertinent questions to stimulate discussion. Once discussion on this started, the participants were asked to identify the three areas of improvement in Montgomery County. Furthermore, Fellows also asked the participants, once they had identified the improvement areas, to provide suggestions on how to incorporate those changes.

With strengths and improvement areas identified for Montgomery County, alongside other suggestions, the conversation moved to its second phase—the exploratory phase. Part 2 of the discussion focused on considering pros and cons of zoning itself. The participant guides contained non-exhaustive benefits and tradeoffs of the practice for participants to consider during deliberation. Fellows presented the following three overarching questions to begin the discussion:

- What do we think of zoning and planning at a foundational level?
- How should zoning be implemented if we were to have it?
- If Montgomery County didn't pursue zoning, what viable solutions are there?

With these questions, the discussion progressed among the participants. Following pros and cons, towards the end, the Fellows also put the question of finding better alternatives to zoning that participants could discuss. After this part, the deliberation moved to the Report Out and Conclusion section.

To conclude the conversation, a WDPD facilitator from each table reported out what their group identified as Montgomery County's strengths and improvement areas. The facilitators also presented a summary of their group's conversation on zoning. Following the report out, Democracy Fellow Michael Krutz '18 thanked all participants who gathered for the conversation and closed the event.

The schedule for the event was as follows:

- 6:30 p.m.-6:35 p.m.: Participants take seats and Introduction
- 6:35 p.m.-6:45 p.m.: Table Introductions
- 6:45 p.m.-7:00 p.m.: First half – Strengths of Montgomery County
- 7:00 p.m.-7:25 p.m.: Improvement Areas
- 7:30 p.m.-7:55 p.m.: Second half – Exploratory Phase on Zoning
- 7:55 p.m.-8:00 p.m.: Report out and Conclusion

## **Community Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank a number of individuals for their help in preparing for and assisting WDPD's research efforts. Several local officials generously offered their time to meet with Democracy Fellows in order to deepen their understanding of the issues and refer them to other stakeholders. WDPD worked with Ron Dickerson of the Montgomery County Redevelopment Commission to understand the complexity of the issues surrounding land use and local economic development. Cheryl Morphew of CRMorphew Consulting LLC helped the initiative to learn about the workings of comprehensive plans in Montgomery County and the zoning process. In addition to these interactions, WDPD also benefited from the perspective of engaged citizens with an interest in the issue, including members of the Montgomery County Tea Party Constitutional Conservatives.

## Project Design

In preparation for the conversation, WDPD conducted research through various focus groups to learn about the various aspects regarding land planning and zoning in Montgomery County. These sessions included interviews with individuals from the following groups: Bose Public Affairs, CRMorphew Consulting LLC, MIBOR Realtor Association, Montgomery County Redevelopment Commission, and Montgomery County Tea Party Constitutional Conservatives. WDPD's research and feedback with the focus group interviewees reflected the deliberation's format and guide, with viewpoints and beliefs regarding county-wide land planning and zoning being presented from multiple perspectives.

Following months of research and preparation, WDPD hosted a deliberative conversation at Southmont High School in Montgomery County on April 10, 2018. The conversation began at 6:30 p.m. and lasted approximately two hours. The event brought 57 individuals who were split up randomly by being given numbers that corresponded to assigned tables. Across seven different tables, participants discussed land planning and zoning in Montgomery County with the help of a WDPD facilitator to guide their conversation. In total, 12 WDPD fellows led the various discussions at each table by facilitating and having note-takers for each conversation.

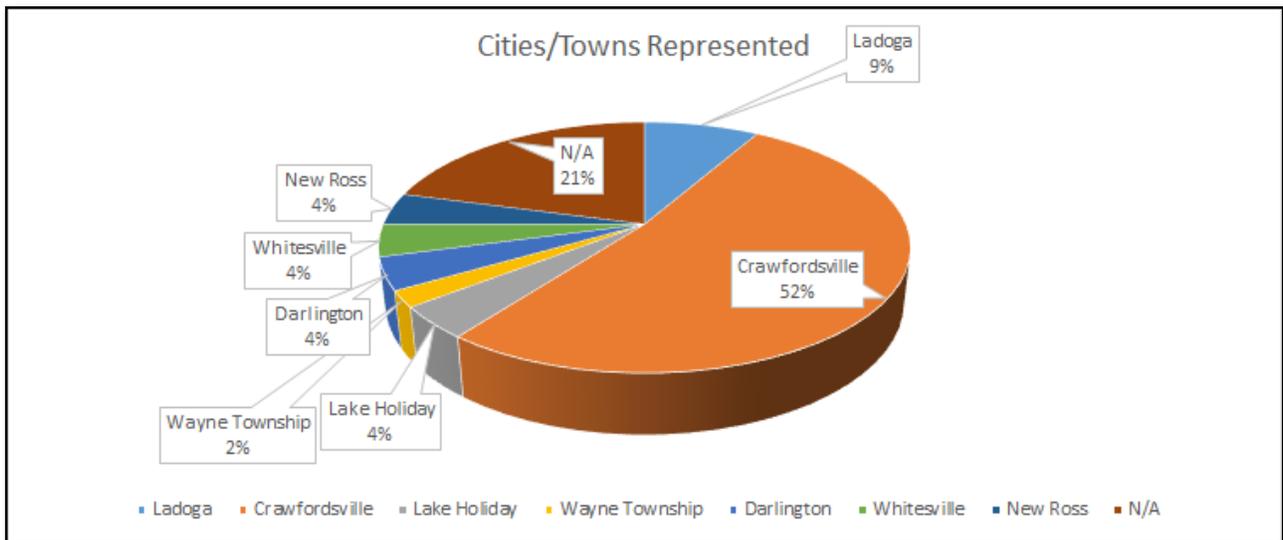
As a result of the research that WDPD conducted, we chose to format the event as a twofold conversation. The first component was focused on gathering public information about what Montgomery County citizens wanted for the development of the County's future. This was assembled by first discussing the current strengths of Montgomery, and then gathering opinions for improvement areas and suggestions for those improvement areas. Following this, the second portion of the conversation was focused on specifically discussing the benefits and tradeoffs of zoning. The zoning portion of the conversation was organized into three areas consisting of zoning on a foundational level, how zoning could potentially be implemented best, and viable alternatives if Montgomery County were to not pursue zoning. Lastly, the conversation was finished upon WDPD members at each of the seven tables reporting back to the entire audience on what was discussed, prioritized, and presented at each respective table.



## Deliberation Analysis

### Demographics

The participants involved in the deliberation titled "Planning for Montgomery County's Future" came from a wide variety of backgrounds throughout the County. Out of the 57 participants, WDPD received 50 completed surveys from which the following data was gathered. The median age of those who completed the surveys was 59 years old. 70.8% of participants were male, while 29.2% were female. Lastly, 6 different cities/townships were identified to be represented at the deliberation, with a vast majority of participants being from Crawfordsville and a notable portion recording that their city/town was N/A.



### Part 1: Strengths and Improvement Areas

#### **Strength: Agriculture Community**

The agricultural heritage and economy of Montgomery County was consistently emphasized across the seven tables. Not only was the agricultural economy noted for benefitting farmers, but was considered by some to be a foundation for the rest of the Montgomery County economy. One participant explained, "Agriculture is your number one job supplier... by far. It generates the most income, most dollars. This is a rural community; it's not Avon, and it's not a city. It's a rural community, and that's the way the majority of people want it."

Participants seemed to consider agriculture as not only a key area of livelihood, but also an area of pride for the County. It was mentioned multiple times that Montgomery County was the top or among the top producers of corn and soybeans in Indiana. Based on many of the expressed opinions of community members at this conversation, maintaining and preserving the County's agricultural heritage and sector should be considered a top priority in the comprehensive planning process.

### **Strength: Education System**

When participants were asked "What would you say to sell Montgomery County to someone?" highlighting the education system was a prominent answer throughout all seven tables. All three high schools in the County (Crawfordsville, Northmont, and Southmont) were considered quality schools by standards of many participants, most notably for the quality of teachers and school infrastructure.

One participant said, "I got two kids in the school system, and both their teachers are beyond fantastic." Another participant highlighted the curriculum available across all three high schools in technology courses for students who may not be interested in college. It was noted that this county-wide collaboration combined resources to offer some unique opportunities for students not offered at other school corporations, including "tool systems" and "machinery equipment" at Southmont High School that is available for students to use and train on.

### **Strength: Small Town Environment with Accessibility to Urban Areas**

Many felt that Montgomery County had a unique asset in being a small, tucked away rural community that also provided easy access to more urban areas like Indianapolis and Lafayette. Particularly, the proximity to Interstate 74 and Route 231 were most prominently highlighted for providing easy transportation to cities that might supply more jobs. In essence, citizens felt like Montgomery County can become a unique bedroom community that provides the peace and quietness of the country and not the hustle and bustle of urban and suburban areas.

One citizen noted, "I like our small-town atmosphere. I don't know if our economic growth has been there, but our small-town appeal has been maintained. We're hidden away, but we're accessible too." Another also explained, "You get from 74 to 465, you can be anywhere. The amount of time to get from Montgomery County to Indianapolis is the same as it is to get from Noblesville."

Lastly, many felt that the County's unique location of offering a quiet rural culture in close proximity to cities could be a marketing tool to bring more residents in. A participant described it this way: "I think people would want to move here because the low taxes, the quality of life, and the quality of education. We already have people who live here and go outside the County for their jobs. It's not necessarily that you have to have big industry here; you just have to offer a great place to live, and people will come here. They'll go outside the County to work."

### **Strength: Recreational Use**

Another aspect of the County that wasn't quite as prominent as the last three categories, but still worth mentioning, is the recreational opportunities for residents and tourists. The County's three golf courses, Sugar Creek, and Shades State Park were all mentioned as great recreational areas that Montgomery County offered. It was also mentioned that these assets can be used to bring in tourism business.

### **Improvement Area: *Low Population Size***

All tables expressed concern at some level about the stagnant population size and lack of young people in the County. What many people refer to as "brain drain" was mainly caused, according to some, by lack of housing options for young families and lack of high paying jobs. According to a few citizens, Montgomery County's population has been stagnant for years now, and many expressed they would like to see that move in an upward trajectory.

While describing Montgomery County as a "paradise," one participant said this: "If we want to continue to have a paradise, we have to have people here. And part of that is young people. I think that's an important part is how we're going to keep kids here—and I'm not talking about kids going through high school—but kids who go to college, and a lot of them never come back."

However, it should also be noted that not everyone agreed that the County should try appealing to young people. Some think that the interests of young people and those of the current residents don't coincide. One citizen said, "I don't think there's anything we can do here to make those people stay. I don't want Montgomery County to be what they want."

For those who did believe this was an issue that had to be solved, many solutions were suggested, including bringing more high-skilled jobs (college and vocational training) to the area, utilizing the area's colleges (DePauw, Ivy Tech, Purdue, Wabash) for recruitment to those jobs, and developing residential areas for young families to live.

### **Improvement Area: *Drug Epidemic***

Like many rural areas of Indiana, Montgomery County has been hit hard by the opioid epidemic. Many expressed concerns with this problem as not only being a public health issue, but a workforce issue as well. While there are many employers in the area that need employees, many people who apply for jobs cannot pass a drug test to be eligible for work. One participant explained, "I talked to many HR directors who said they're not growing because they can't find a reliable work force. And for those who are growing, they're still struggling with that."

A few participants also said it was a safety issue, as drugs could be a deterrent for any young families who would be afraid of their children's exposure to illegal substances at school and in their neighborhood. This has grown to be such a big problem for the area that one citizen claimed police dispatch gets around 60 calls a day for drug-related incidents. For solutions, many tables struggled to find what can be done on a government level. It was noted that the County already had one of the highest law enforcement numbers per population square mile. It was also said that many emergency services and morgues are struggling to keep up with the number of overdoses and addiction cases as it is. But some suggested that there needs to be encouragement for more neighborhood support for those who are struggling with drugs in communities. It was also said that the County needs better mental health facilities for rehabilitation programs and could save more money for taxpayers that way, rather than just incarcerating drug users.

### **Improvement Area: Road Repairs**

While not talked about in great depth, it was consistently brought up that roads and infrastructure needed repairs county-wide. From potholes to gravel roads, many citizens shared their discontent with the current state of roads that are vital for traveling from home to work and back.

### **Improvement Area: Vocational Training in Schools**

Finally, many citizens felt like our schools were losing out on opportunities to keep skilled-workers in the County by not offering trade classes in the local high schools. While some thought that County schools were doing some good with vocational training, others thought the schools weren't doing enough. It was said that more emphasis on trade jobs can be an alternative for students who aren't in agriculture and not interested in going to college.

As one citizen put it, "If you're not in agriculture, you don't grow up operating equipment. You have to be taught how." It was noted multiple times that jobs like "construction" and "welding," while not necessarily requiring a college degree, are skilled professions and offer the high-paying salaries that the County wants to attract.

## **Part 2: Pros and Cons of Zoning**

### **Cons of Zoning**

As the survey analysis presented later in this report shows, there was no overwhelming majority for or against zoning. While there was a lot of agreement in the in the last two sections of the deliberation regarding strengths and improvement areas, many people were divided on whether zoning can be a viable option for preserving those strengths and improving those weaknesses.

One of the chief concerns among people who were against zoning was how the zoning board would be checked by citizens of Montgomery County. Some said that zoning was a long-term ordeal that is susceptible to change throughout the years. There were participants who were concerned whether it was realistic to think that these changes can always be made with the inclusion of voices from Montgomery County residents. One participant said, "We need to have some way to have confidence in the zoning board. If you have competent zoning officials, it could be a really good thing."

Some others were also concerned about the influence of big business in changing zoning ordinances that can hurt the little guy, in order to accommodate the corporation that wants to set up shop in Montgomery County.

A citizen described it this way: "Economics is going to decide it no matter what we do. If we zone a space as agriculture, and a business decides they want to come in here and hire 400 people, chances are the homeowners around that area aren't going to have a say because we're worried about jobs and money."

Finally, some feared zoning would bring over-regulation and be a hindrance to the private property rights of their own homes. Many wanted the right to build/alter their home or local business however they pleased without having to apply for permits and complying with other regulations mandated by “another layer of government bureaucracy.”

### **Pros of Zoning**

However, some also expressed confidence in the zoning process. One of the benefits brought up was the ability for more public discretion to how land is used in a community. There was an example brought up of how zoning in Crawfordsville was able to include the public in voicing their concerns against a new development being built near the “Wiley Property,” where 25 people were able to voice their concern about the new development because of zoning.

Windmills were also brought up during this part of the conversation, being a very unpopular and hot topic among county residents. Those who were for zoning said that zoning could be a “tool” to stop something like windmills from being built in the first place.

Also many of those who were for zoning noted that zoning ordinances would make a safer bet for developers and entrepreneurs to invest in the County. One citizen explained, “People don’t want to come our way because there’s no protection. People don’t want to build something if there’s no protection,” that protection being zoning.

## Survey Analysis

### Survey Description

After the initial deliberation, participants were then asked to take a post survey (Note: there was no pre-survey before the event). It was expressed in a note of disclosure that survey participation was completely optional. Out of 57 participants at the event, we received 50 surveys. Survey takers were asked for basic information, such as gender, age, employment status, occupation, and city/town in which they lived.

They were then asked questions about how likely they were to favor zoning before the deliberation versus after the deliberation. This question was answered through a rating system **between 1 and 10 (1 meaning absolutely against zoning; 10 meaning completely for zoning)**. As a part of these questions, there was also a comments section for survey takers to elaborate on their rating answers.

Survey takers were then asked about their opinions on whether their voices were being included in the comprehensive planning process before and after the deliberation. This was also done through a rating system **between 1 and 10 (1 meaning input is not considered at all; 10 meaning input is being completely considered)**. These questions also came with a comments section for further elaboration on these answers.

Finally, participants were asked if they felt like they learned something new about zoning or comprehensive planning throughout their deliberation **(1 meaning they learned nothing new; 10 meaning they learned many new things)**. This was then followed up with a question about how WDPD can improve deliberations and community conversations on county-wide planning and zoning.

### How likely were people to favor zoning before and after the event?

#### Quantitative Analysis

To compare answers of how people viewed zoning before deliberation and after deliberation, we took the means and medians of both answers to see if there was any change and if deliberation made any difference on overall community outlook on the subject of county-wide zoning. The means and medians for the respective questions are below:

| “Favorability of Zoning” | Pre  | Post |
|--------------------------|------|------|
| Mean                     | 4.48 | 4.52 |
| Median                   | 2.5  | 2    |

Based on these numbers, deliberation had no notable difference for community outlooks on zoning. The change in mean before and after the deliberation increased slightly but is marginal at best. The median is notably lower than the average, actually falling half a point from before the deliberation to after the deliberation.

The reason for having a lower median can be explained by people who took a non-zoning stance were more likely to take a stauncher stance than people who were pro-zoning. In the data, it is noticeable that those who favored zoning were much more likely to favor zoning in various degrees. Some recorded sevens, while others put down tens and everything in between. But for those who were against zoning, there was considerably less variety in recorded numbers. The vast majority of those who against zoning recorded ones with little variation from that, resulting in the median being much lower.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Among those who were against zoning, the most consistent reasons as to why were fears of private property rights being taken away and unpopularity of government bureaucracy. On private property rights, one participant wrote, "concerned about harm to existing homeowners," while another stated bluntly that "zoning is an infringement upon private property rights."

Others who disfavored zoning focused on "government overreach," saying that zoning is "just another way for government to control our lives." Another participant wrote, "I don't like a few people planning for the whole county."

It should also be mentioned that some participants also questioned the effectiveness of zoning in Crawfordsville. A participant wrote, "I do not see where C-ville [Crawfordsville] has been improved by zoning."

On the flipside, those who favored zoning consistently cited economic growth and business investment as a reason for implementation. Participants wrote that zoning is "needed for environmental and social movement to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century," and that "zoning will help bring in business... businesses only want to go where zoning is."

## Did people feel their voices were being heard in the comprehensive planning process?

### Quantitative Analysis

Like the zoning questions, survey takers were asked to rate 1-10 on how well they believed their voices were being included in the comprehensive plan process before and after the deliberation. It appears that the deliberation made a notable difference in how participants answered this question.

| “Voices Heard” | Pre  | Post |
|----------------|------|------|
| Mean           | 4.11 | 6.41 |
| Median         | 3    | 7    |

Both median and means moved up significantly after the participants took part in the deliberation. Intuitively, this makes sense, but this also tells us that other methods to include citizens in the comprehensive planning process have not been adequate from the public's perception. Given that residents had previously had numerous opportunities to voice their concerns about planning and zoning at public events—including several forums specifically dedicated to these issues—these findings suggest a need for the comprehensive planning process to adopt a more deliberative framework in future events.

### Qualitative Analysis

Not as many survey takers wrote down comments during this section, but for those who did, some of the notable ones were the following:

- "I felt encouraged to express my opinion."
- "It was a good, fair, unbiased format."

## Did participants learn something new about planning & zoning through the deliberation?

Participants were asked to rate how much they learned from the conversation and their table members' comments. On a scale between 1 and 10, the **mean** for this answer was **3.76** with a **median** of **3**. A possible explanation for a lower number on the scale could be due to participants who were interested in attending the event were more likely to have more knowledge of planning and zoning to begin with. Another explanation could be that those interested in attending the event already had strongly held opinions. Therefore, they were less likely to be open to other opinions different from their own regarding this topic.

## Conclusion

While zoning proves to remain a divisive issue in Montgomery County, most residents seem to agree upon the fundamental strengths and improvement areas for the community. In the future, deliberations should expand upon Part 1 of our deliberative framework to gain more solution-based insight from citizens now that these core strengths and problems have been more clearly identified. A more solution-based conversation can help assure community members that their ideas and insights are being included in the comprehensive planning process.

The topic of zoning is one that demands continued discussion, as no community consensus exists at this time. Aside from deeply held ideological obstacles, the need for further education exists. In some cases, conversational progress stalled not because one participant favored “property rights” while another opposed them, but because participants held vastly different notions of what zoning actually *is*. Given that the topic implicates a complicated web of legal, political, moral, and economic factors that are inadequately understood—even by well-intentioned citizens seeking to comprehend the breadth and depths of these topics—stakeholders must commit themselves to listening and learning in order to develop the shared information base necessary for effective deliberation. Future conversations should aim to both solicit stakeholder perspectives and continue the process of educating the community on complicated issues relating to economic development, planning, zoning, and property rights.

Exploring what zoning *is* and what it *is not* in a deliberative setting can help Montgomery County move in a more unified direction regarding land use. For this to be realized, many entities of different political leanings must commit to sharing what they believe zoning is so that the community can reach better mutual understanding of the reasons for and against planning and zoning. Until these *a priori* steps are taken, it is our opinion that discussions over planning and zoning in Montgomery County will continue to be dominated by divisive political arguments that fail to adequately account for the diverse perspectives of the community.