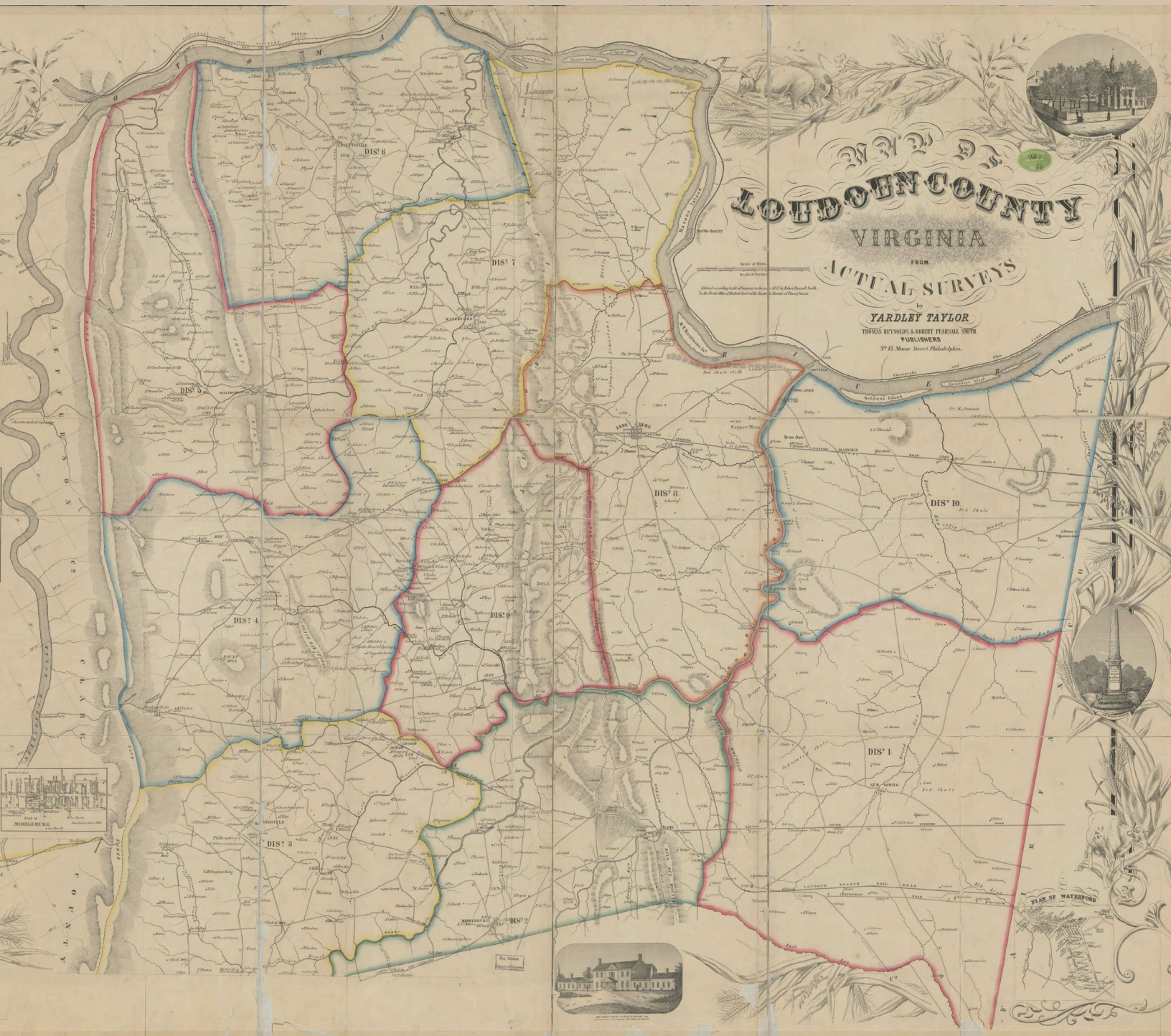


# A BLUEPRINT FOR LOUDOUN 2040

## THE LOUDOUN WAY



PREPARED BY THE COALITION OF LOUDOUN TOWNS

# ***THE LOUDOUN WAY***

## **A Blueprint for Loudoun 2040**

### **Preamble**

On behalf of the Coalition of Loudoun Towns, the Mayors of Loudoun respectfully offer the Board of Supervisors *The Loudoun Way*—a blueprint for a Comprehensive Plan that we believe will best serve the citizens of Loudoun and stand the test of time.

We propose a plan that will temper growth to allow us to catch up on our commitments for public services and infrastructure that our citizens demand and deserve. A plan that will build on Loudoun's economic success while avoiding the pitfalls of the past and cure our addiction to growth that has led to serious housing, land use and infrastructure issues. A plan that is comprehensive in its content and cognizant of the interrelationship of the critical transportation, land use and housing policies of the future.

A plan that will honor our heritage and what generations past have loved about Loudoun and what generations will be able to experience in the future—a county rich in natural and historic assets and culture, a county that is a mecca to innovative businesses and entrepreneurs and the nerve center of the wired world, while at the same time diversifies its economic base. A county that invests generously in a green infrastructure of open space, parks and trails and that continues to support, and benefit from, a thriving agricultural and rural economy that sets Loudoun apart as a truly unique locale.

A plan that can make Loudoun a place of international acclaim—one that establishes principles of truly smart growth and innovative design standards for the new urban centers and suburbs of the future. A plan that stimulates creative redevelopment and demands permanent green assets for all Loudouners to enjoy. A plan that boldly proclaims and executes meaningful protection of our farmland.

And a plan that creates a strategy for achieving a goal we all share, attainable quality housing for the thousands who work in—and for—Loudoun, but cannot afford today to live here.

The Coalition of Loudoun Towns (COLT) has contributed to and endorses the analysis and recommendations of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition with regard to the proposed Loudoun 2040 Comprehensive Plan now under consideration.

As the elected leaders of Loudoun's seven towns and representative of the residents in the towns' vicinity, we bring a perspective we believe is shared by a large proportion of Loudoun residents. We believe the proposed plan is not in accord with the prevailing views and desires of our constituents and those expressed by thousands of citizens during the Envision Loudoun process of public input.

Further, in our view, the plan as proposed to the Board by the Planning Commission is fiscally irresponsible and indeed a threat to the County's sound financial health. The proposed plan is a green

light for unconscionable overdevelopment, an invitation to target sensitive areas and, if permitted, would exacerbate exponentially the current deficits in public services and transportation infrastructure, threatening our economy and eroding the quality of life for residents.

The Board's Envision Loudoun process was a laudable effort to build a Comprehensive Plan that reflected the views, vision and aspirations of the citizenry. Participation was unprecedented in the numbers and in the level of thoughtful engagement over the course of two years. The Board and citizens should take great pride in this exercise in democracy at a grassroots level. Thus, it should be disheartening to all of us to find that the plan proposed for adoption by the Planning Commission has so thoroughly disregarded, and indeed largely negated, the public's input.

It is the intent of COLT to offer a blueprint for a Comprehensive Plan that we believe is responsive to the desires of the broad Loudoun community, that is fiscally and socially responsible, that provides plentiful attainable housing, that respects and protects the environment, that supports economic opportunity and entrepreneurialism, that supports the rural economy and honors Loudoun's agricultural and historical heritage, and that seeks and embraces imaginative solutions and innovations and always aspires to excellence.



## **Our Current Challenges: Symptoms and Causes**

Over the last 20 years Loudoun County has experienced explosive growth, some five times the national rate and more than three times the rate of the D.C. metropolitan region. This level of growth is unsustainable.

While this growth has brought opportunities to our County, it has also left many challenges in its wake, which must be reconciled with the Loudoun 2040 plan. If we fail to meet these existing challenges, we jeopardize the fiscal health of Loudoun and all we have fought to preserve for generations. To understand these challenges and problems, we must first examine the symptoms and then, more important, we must understand the underlying causes and address them. Only with this type of examination will we create a plan that meets our challenges now and ensures we do not create new ones in the future.

### ***The Transportation and Traffic Challenge***

There is no question that traffic in Loudoun has become one of the biggest problems we face, harming productivity, our economy and our quality of life. Commutes in many cases have doubled in time because of congestion in the last 20 years. Loudouners today drive some 6.5 million miles every day, an increase of almost 100 percent over 10 years. To put this in perspective, our residents drive the distance to the moon and back 13 times every day. Our fast-paced population growth (and number of vehicles) has left VDOT and the County far behind in keeping up with a functioning road network to handle this volume. This transportation infrastructure problem now consumes a majority of the county's capital improvement budget. Whereas we were spending approximately 20 percent of our capital improvement budget on new road construction a decade ago, today that number is 53 percent and growing, more than \$150 million annually. And this spending is to simply catch up to the housing growth that has already taken place. Every new resident equals one new vehicle on the road. The proposed plan is silent on the funding to address transportation issues. That silence is deafening.

**These are the symptoms, but what are the causes?** Primarily, it is attributable to the growth we have absorbed over the last 20 years. While thru-county commuting is an issue, more than 80 percent of the miles driven within Loudoun are by Loudoun residents. Without ensuring a manageable rate of growth going forward, we will never fix our transportation network or traffic issues.

### ***The Schools Challenge***

Loudoun has 92 public schools and the school system absorbs 60 percent of the County's total annual budget, whereas the average county in Virginia spends between 30 and 40 percent of its total budget on schools. Also, for decades we have been building schools at a faster rate than any county in Virginia. However, because it takes two to three years to build a new school, in many cases by the time a new school opens it is already at capacity. We continue to add trailers at older schools to accommodate the influx of students we do not have facilities for even now. This situation results in frequent school redistricting, forcing many children to change schools multiple times over just their elementary school years. Additionally, the County estimates that by 2030 we will need an additional 14 schools just to

accommodate the currently predicted growth. Today, the costs to build a new school is over \$75 million, thus to meet the future need we will require over \$1 billion just for school construction. This does not take into account the operating costs of running the schools. The average home in Loudoun pays \$5,000 a year in real estate taxes, but each student costs more than \$14,000, meaning that for every home we add with one child, we add net \$9,000 of cost to our school system, annually. For a household with two children, that net cost rises \$23,000.

**These are the symptoms, but what are the causes?** With Loudoun spending some 60 percent of its budget on schools, and barely keeping up with the demand, we must change to address the cause, which is the unrestrained housing growth in Loudoun over the last 20 years. Each house we build adds to the requirement for more schools and the annual costs the county must pay to run them. With 60 cents of every dollar in the county going to our school system, the County is unable to afford other vital services and amenities offered in the past.

### ***The Infrastructure and Service Challenges***

Among the largest problems facing Loudoun residents are the deficiencies in our infrastructure and public services, critical elements to maintaining community standards of living. Loudoun has always been known for a superior quality of life, which has made our community the place we all choose to live, work and play. But we are in danger of losing it forever. As a percentage of dollars spent per resident, Loudoun today is spending less on services and amenities than it has in decades. In fact, 13 percent less is spent today on resident services and quality of life amenities than just 20 years ago. According to the county's own analysis, we have a deficit of 29 public park facilities, the majority located in east. In the last 10 years the County has built just one new park, while growing by almost 30 percent.

**These are the symptoms, but what are the causes?** Uncontrolled growth has forced the County to make critical choices in terms of spending. We have sought to keep our taxes stable over the last decade, but the County has been forced to make choices—build more schools and roads to accommodate growth at the expense of infrastructure, services and amenities for current residents. This will only get worse if we do not reduce the rate of growth and ensure a manageable balance.

### ***The Attainable Housing Challenge***

Housing prices in Loudoun are of concern to all elected officials. As Mayors of the seven towns in Loudoun we face this same issue. The average home price in Loudoun of about \$450,000 presents a challenge for a starting family or modest wage worker to make Loudoun their home. Some say the best way to solve this problem is to simply build more houses—a *lot more houses*. However, that is exactly what we have done for 20 years, and that is actually what has created our affordability issue.

**These are the symptoms, but what are the causes?** A major reason for the higher prices of our housing stock is simple, the houses have gotten much bigger—significantly bigger. An American Enterprise Institute study found that, adjusted for inflation, the average cost per square foot for a house has remained basically flat over the last 40 years. In 1973, the cost was \$115 per sq. ft. – today, it is \$119 per sq. ft. What changed is the size—in 1973 the average home was 1,600 square feet and had three occupants.

Today, houses average nearly 2,800 square feet, with only 2.5 occupants—and in Loudoun the average home is much bigger.

While homes have grown by 43 percent, real wages haven't. It's no wonder we can't find an affordable home in 2019, when we could in 1973. Unfortunately, our planning over the last 20 years has not addressed this issue, and the proposed plan will still fail to address it, as it does not make the link between home sizes and affordability, but proposes to simply build more homes. This must be a central consideration in developing a real strategy on how we will solve the housing attainability issue. We must address the cause to cure the symptom.

Loudoun must address these and other challenges in its new Comprehensive Plan. How we face these challenges will define Loudoun County for generations to come. We will never solve this problem by doing more of the same, we must listen to the voices of our citizens and tackle the symptoms that unconstrained growth has caused.

## Ten Principles of *The Loudoun Way*

Loudoun is rightly proud of its role at the center of one of the globe's most innovative technological regions. We are at the forefront of epic change and the county and its citizens have reaped many economic rewards from this. Loudoun is also rightly proud of its resilient rural heritage and vibrant rural economy that today has created a leading agricultural, recreational and tourism destination. And Loudoun today also has the extraordinary opportunity to create a new urban area that should set the standard for cities of the future.

With no less fervor and commitment than our commitment to economic development, Loudoun County must embrace the potential and the responsibility to envision and plan for a future in which the only “unconstrained” elements are our aspirations, imagination and the imperative for excellence—a plan that will be the engine that drives what will be acclaimed as the “The Loudoun Way.”

What we offer is a clear set of principles, a blueprint that respects the voice of citizens, is fiscally responsible, sustainable, innovative *and inspirational*. We offer this as a guide to rethink our future and to craft a plan that will stand up to the scrutiny and evaluation of performance it should be subjected to over the next two decades.

*The Loudoun Way* will be, first and foremost, guided by the desires, needs and aspirations of its current and future residents, as was envisioned by the Loudoun Board of Supervisors at the outset of the Comprehensive Plan process. It will regard no goals as being beyond our reach. It will not acquiesce to short-sighted demands or for immediate returns at the expense of sound planning, fiscal responsibility and enduring excellence.

Loudoun must now seize the day. With that as our motivation, COLT offers a blueprint for *The Loudoun Way*.

A plan that guides Loudoun with 10 actionable principles:

1. Temper growth, allowing us to catch up on the infrastructure, the unmet physical and social needs—the underpinnings that our expansive 20 years of growth have outpaced
2. Design land use policies and innovative planning that reflect true needs and shared vision for the urban, suburban, transition and rural policy areas
3. Build an effective transportation network in harmony with residential and commercial development—not as a response to uncontrolled growth
4. Plan comprehensively, cognizant of the interconnections, interrelationships and interdependencies of housing, land use and infrastructure
5. Develop realistic housing goals that demands from our developers the inclusion of right-sized attainable quality housing across the county
6. Imagine and innovate as we design our new urban areas and our cities of the future
7. Revitalize and strengthen existing suburban communities with creative redevelopment and innovative infill

8. Commit to the permanence of the Transition Policy Area as intended, while reimagining it to include accessible parks and trails, equine and other shared public facilities and assets
9. Protect the rural west and redouble our commitments to its economic success by investing and supporting the rural economy and mitigating zoning issues that threaten it
10. Establish a bold “zero net loss of farmland” policy that will hold the line on any further erosion of a sustainable, profitable and productive agricultural foundation and that will ensure the preservation of rural Loudoun

### **PRINCIPLE 1: *Temper Growth***

*The Loudoun Way* will eschew the fiscally irresponsible cycle of development and growth that has, *and will if permitted*, inevitably continue to impose massive infrastructure needs and debts that far outstrip any positive fiscal impact accruing from that growth.

We recommend a planned pause in new development to catch our breath and deliver to our citizens the investment in infrastructure we have promised and what they demand. With our current strong economy, now is the time to make the bold investments to benefit all our current citizens.

*The Loudoun Way* will seize the opportunity to systematically meet unmet needs incurred from two decades of rapid growth, while carefully and meticulously establish the enduring principles and foundation for responsible, innovative planning that delivers world-class communities that will serve and compliment all of Loudoun.

### **PRINCIPLE 2: *Apply Commonsense Land Use Policies***

As consistently one of the fastest growing counties in America for the past 20 years, Loudoun’s population has risen at a rate of more than 5 percent annually for nearly 20 years. Public sentiment and fiscal responsibility call for moderation and refocus on carefully planned growth and a period to aggressively ensure unmet needs are secured for the existing population.

Today, at an unprecedented nexus of a strong economy and demand for relatively low-services cost, high financial benefit technology-related development, Loudoun has an extraordinary opportunity to seize and maximize the potential.

Development—residential, commercial and industrial—in the past 20 years has radically transformed the Loudoun landscape, consuming vast swaths of open spaces in the east and west. In the RPA, farmland has been diminished by some 20 square miles in the past 10 years. In the TPA, the area designated to be a permanent spatial and visual buffer transitioning from urban/suburban to rural, some 5,000 dwelling units have been built and another 6,000 can be built under existing RGP. Careful management of this already planned residential growth, tempered by targeted data center expansion along with broad public facility



use, can retain the TPA’s original intent, offer more attainable housing and overcome current large unmet green infrastructure deficits. The new, unbuilt Urban Policy Areas offer the opportunity to leverage densities to ameliorate the need for new developments in the RPA and TPA, and to increase attainable housing.

We recommend applying commonsense principles to all of our land use policies, ensuring they are resident-centric rather than developer-centric, and demanding innovative planning that will address our true needs and realize a shared vision for the Urban, Suburban, Transition and Rural policy areas.

Each area is unique and each area has the potential for new and imaginative planning, benefiting from past experience. Each needs its own set of planning tools to be applied.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: *Address transportation deficits, build an effective transportation network***

We propose an integrated, coordinated plan to address the transportation infrastructure deficits of our current state to relieve the congestion and bottlenecks that plague our citizens every day.

We must have a comprehensive and coordinated approach that sets transportation improvement priorities and, in response to our citizens’ desires, builds multimodal and shared use trails and provides alternative transportation options that will facilitate accessibility for residents and visitors alike.

We must recognize the diminishing state funding for transportation projects that contribute to growth and more congestion, and thus plan accordingly. The proposed plan does not consider the costs associated with transportation needs that would result with its projected growth.

### **PRINCIPLE 4: *Be Comprehensive in Scope***

The new plan must be truly comprehensive in recognizing and addressing the interconnectedness and interdependencies of housing, land use and infrastructure. For too long each has been stuck in its own silo, traveling on its own trajectory. Moving forward, these elements must be prioritized, planned in harmony and synchronized in their timing and funding if we wish to create the Loudoun we all desire.

### **PRINCIPLE 5: *Build Affordable, Attainable Housing***

If the past is an indicator, affordable housing is not guaranteed simply by building more housing. Only proactive policies and planning will ensure attainable housing in Loudoun.

We call for realistic housing goals and specifically a plan that demands from our developers the building of right-sized attainable housing across the county. If we truly believe we need to offer housing in Loudoun for our teachers, first responders—all our public servants—and moderate wage earners, then we must take bold action.

We need practical policies requiring the building of attainable housing. The proposed plan's forecast for growth and housing demand drives a distorted and unrealistic view of our "need" for another 28,000 dwelling units, on top of the 48,000 homes our existing plan allows. This supposed need is to accommodate a forecasted 2040 population that is nearly 100,000 more than the county and Council of Governments predicts.

Specific recommendations include:

- Analyze the existing portfolio of workforce and affordable housing to form a baseline and then create a sustainable set of policies and actions to meet affordable housing needs over the long term.
- Review the county's existing affordable housing programs, determine their effectiveness, identify barriers, and define where and how these programs can be expanded, such as including our town public servants.
- Expand the housing revolving loan fund to assist private and nonprofit organizations to facilitate the provision of affordable housing, and develop new incentive programs that directly lead to workforce and affordable housing.
- Remove exemptions for lot size and unit count that allows developments to bypass affordability provisions, as well as exemptions for large multifamily structures that prevent dense development in the Suburban Policy Area from providing affordable housing where it is needed most.
- Work aggressively with developers to tailor design standards for attainable housing footprints to be reflective of each land use area.
- Collaborate with the Metropolitan Council of Governments to seek metro-wide targets for affordable housing and focus Loudoun programs to achieve our fair share.

*The Loudoun Way* will create bold land use policies that require an array of attainable housing products in all land use policy areas to offer innovative, right-sized quality housing that is within reach of our county public servants and the entire county workforce.

#### **PRINCIPLE 6: *Bring innovation and expertise to the new urban areas***

With the extension of Metro and the farsighted establishment of the UPA, we have within our reach the ability to lay the groundwork for 21st-century cities that are uniquely "Loudoun." Carefully planned, with the long view as our guide, the addition of the Urban Policy Areas will serve to create, maintain and sustain an unparalleled set of physical and social attributes within a single jurisdiction, the ultimate symbiosis that will define *The Loudoun Way*.

Loudoun can design and build world-class, innovative urban areas and our cities of the future. The costly investment by Loudoun’s taxpayers for the extension of Metro requires nothing less than a meticulously detailed, fiscally responsible, carefully benchmarked plan for the new Urban Policy Areas, with creative and leveraged private/public partnerships that will strategically build out to maximize benefits for our citizens today and in the future. By keeping to the current plan for growth in the TPA, developers will more likely target and accelerate UPA core developments.

Creating world-class cities from the ground up presents the enormous opportunity to replicate Loudoun’s renowned economic-development success by similarly engaging the most advanced, creative and experienced urban planning to bear on the process.

As a key component of *The Loudoun Way*, we call for the establishment of a Loudoun Urban Task Force to assemble proven expertise to develop cutting-edge urban environments that are—uniquely and endemically—tied to Loudoun’s traditional heritage and the healthy and open natural spaces and historic assets of a vast “rural reserve” within close proximity.

#### **PRINCIPLE 7: *Commit to a Smart Growth and Redevelopment for the Suburban Area***

*The Loudoun Way* will drive and incentivize investments that strengthen, revitalize and redevelop aging or inadequate suburban communities

Some 50 years of suburban development has substantially built out the SPA. However, with its maturity, in-place infrastructure and an evolving market demand for more compact walkable and amenity-rich communities, the SPA is ripe for targeted high-quality revitalization through redevelopment and infill, that can also provide high-quality attainable housing, accessible amenities and public and green spaces.

*The Loudoun Way* embraces the opportunity and invests in redevelopment to set a world-class standard. Creating high-quality, attainable housing in proximity to robust employment and activity centers is a fiscally, environmentally and socially responsible investment for all of Loudoun. We recommend that the new plan provide for our suburban areas and its residents revitalization and imaginative redevelopment to strengthen and enhance communities, capitalizing on the existing infrastructure already in place.

*The Loudoun Way* will target infill opportunities with appropriate density for new residential and commercial centers at a cost that is much lower than new development in other areas.

Providing innovative density alternatives to costly sprawl is fiscally and environmentally responsible, offering more attainable housing in close proximity to employment centers and meeting a growing demand among young and seniors alike for walkable, amenity-rich, suburban and urban-type living.

#### **PRINCIPLE 8: *Hold the line on the TPA***

*The Loudoun Way* will boldly assert the original intent for the permanent Transition Policy Area and embrace the unprecedented opportunities that exist within it—and resist the powerful pressure to inundate the TPA with fiscally irresponsible residential development.

One of the most farsighted policies of the existing RGP that has protected Loudoun’s uniqueness has been the TPA. Past boards made the decision to create the Transition Policy Area as *the permanent* zone of transition between the urban and suburban Loudoun to the rural Loudoun. The proposed plan seeks to completely reverse this vision of the Revised General Plan—in complete contradiction to the public’s desires.

Loudoun must remain firm to the commitment to the TPA and its original intent and reject any proposed expansion of the TPA by incorporating into it Rural Policy Area land—which would set a dangerous precedent for future encroachment.

The TPA already is planned to accommodate some 6,000 new dwelling units, and through innovative planning that allows some targeted increases in density, a significant proportion of these should be required to be housing that is attainable to our teachers, first responders, farmworkers and other public workers.

Rather than the proposed plan’s massive growth of residential development in the TPA by another 17,000 dwelling units, we offer another idea. We envision the TPA as the center for accessible resources serving the entire county population, including public facilities and parks and trails, recreational and equine facilities and much open space—what could become Loudoun’s “Central Park.” The TPA offers the best location for many of the unmet green infrastructure needs accessible to our residents today, east and west, and for the new urban areas of the future—while remaining true to its original intent.

The TPA must remain as it was intended, as a spatial and visual transition to the rural west. By reimagining much of the TPA not as “green fields” for new development, but rather as the “green fields” for recreation and relaxation for all Loudoun residents, this board will leave a lasting legacy cherished by generations to come.

*The Loudoun Way* envisions a 2040 TPA that has achieved its original intent as a visually and spatially distinct area transitioning from the urban and suburban densities while simultaneously serving the needs of that dense population, adapting its own development to accommodate high-quality attainable housing and leveraging the immediate but relatively short-term industrial uses to provide critical financial underpinning.

## **PRINCIPLE 9: *Protect the Rural Policy Area***

The attributes of the Rural Policy Area constitute an unprecedented and integral component to the health and quality of life for every citizen by putting “Rural in Reach” for Loudoun’s suburban and urban dwellers.

*The Loudoun Way* requires an unequivocal commitment to the preservation of Loudoun’s rural, agriculture and historic assets and the unleashing of every available creative tool to permanently conserve open spaces and stimulate rapid growth in productive farming.

The preservation of Loudoun’s rural, agriculture and historic assets is a low-cost, low-risk investment that will bear immeasurable returns today and for generations of Loudoun citizens to come.

The existence of an authentic, robust “rural reserve” within easy reach of every Loudoun community and neighborhood is a priceless shared asset that constitutes a distinctive advantage to enable healthy lives and leisure for residents, attract leading businesses and employees, and build a world-class agricultural- and recreational-based tourism destination—and *the net-positive fiscal returns that come with it*.

Positive economic impacts of a strong rural economy are compounded exponentially by the relatively minimal costs of public services required—especially factored against the costs of residential development. As we have successfully incentivized business expansion in the east, we need similar incentives to encourage expansion of productive farming in the west.

Direct and expedited permanent preservation of rural land is, unequivocally, among the most fiscally impactful and responsible policies that can be implemented today. We must reconsider zoning concepts that present a particular threat to this rural area and to its irreplaceable quality soils.

We must recognize that if the 11,000 by-right houses in the existing plan were to be built, rural Loudoun will disappear. Therefore, it is imperative and urgent that all of our planning tools, especially the Transfer of Development Rights and Purchase of Development Rights programs, must be adequately funded and aggressively implemented.

#### **PRINCIPLE 10: *Commit to a “zero net loss” of farmland policy***

Although Loudoun’s rural economy has shown strong growth, the alarming and accelerating loss of farmland at a rate of 10 percent—or more than 20 square miles—in the past seven years, portends a rapid descent toward extinction of a true farming community in Loudoun.

Diminishing the amount of actual farming threatens the viability of a local network of farm-supporting businesses and suppliers, which increases farming costs and decreases profitability for farmers and landowners, undermining the rural economy.

*The Loudoun Way* will directly and aggressively confront this with policies that support the principle of a “zero net loss” of farmland going forward. Actions should include new incentives to put more land into productivity, to make land available to young farmers, and to support creation of incubator farms to serve as training grounds for the next generation of farmers.

This bold principle would powerfully serve to underscore a true belief in a sustainable rural economy.

Declaring that we hold the line to allowing further loss of farmland will be a game changer. This, more than perhaps anything else, will protect the rural west and fuel the agricultural engine for generations to come.