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Development in Prince George's County: Desired Outcomes vs. Current Realities

Lessons from the Zoning Ordinance Transition Period (2022–2025)

COURSE

URSP 603: Land Use Controls

PALS

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ABOUT PALS

The Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) is administered by the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). It is a campus-wide initiative that harnesses the expertise of UMD faculty and the energy and ingenuity of UMD students to help Maryland communities become more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. PALS is designed to provide innovative, low-cost assistance to local governments while creating real-world problem-solving experiences for University of Maryland graduate and undergraduate students.

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Executive Summary

Prince George's County's transition to a new Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations represented one of the most significant land use policy changes in the County's recent history. During the transition period, applicants retained the ability to pursue development applications under either the prior zoning framework or the newly adopted ordinance, creating a unique opportunity to examine how developers, landowners, attorneys, and planning professionals responded to changing regulatory conditions.

This report analyzes approximately 100 development applications reviewed between April 1, 2022 and April 1, 2025 to better understand the factors influencing applicant decisions regarding ordinance selection and the implications of those decisions for County planning goals, implementation, and future policy refinement. Drawing upon application materials, planning staff analyses, public records, student case analyses, and stakeholder engagement, the study identifies patterns in applicant behavior, implementation barriers, and opportunities to improve development review processes.

Several key themes emerged from the analysis. First, applicants frequently prioritized regulatory certainty and predictability when selecting between the prior and new ordinances. In many cases, applicants elected to proceed under the prior ordinance to minimize uncertainty associated with new procedural requirements, interpretation concerns, or evolving implementation practices. Grandfathering provisions and timing considerations frequently influenced these decisions, particularly for projects already in the development pipeline.

Second, the findings suggest that ordinance selection often reflected a broader strategic assessment of risk, timing, and flexibility rather than a simple preference for one regulatory framework over another. While some applicants may have embraced the opportunities created by the new ordinance, including updated development standards and streamlined alignment with County planning priorities, others may have viewed the transition period as introducing uncertainty into entitlement and approval processes.

Third, the analysis identified important areas where development outcomes aligned with County planning goals and where implementation challenges created friction. Several cases demonstrated strong alignment with transit-oriented development objectives, mixed-use goals, housing diversification, and redevelopment priorities. However, other cases revealed instances where procedural complexity, ambiguity in interpretation, or administrative bottlenecks may have constrained intended outcomes or encouraged reliance on legacy regulatory pathways.

Based on these findings, the report recommends a combination of short-term administrative improvements, medium-term ordinance refinements, and long-term monitoring strategies. Immediate recommendations include improving guidance materials, strengthening applicant communication during ordinance transitions, and increasing consistency in implementation. Medium-term recommendations focus on ordinance calibration and process improvements

informed by recurring implementation challenges. Long-term recommendations emphasize data tracking, performance measurement, and periodic ordinance evaluation to ensure continued alignment between County planning goals and development outcomes.

Ultimately, the transition period provides Prince George's County with an important opportunity to evaluate not only how applicants responded to new land use regulations, but also how future ordinance transitions and implementation strategies can be strengthened. The findings suggest that effective implementation depends not only on the content of planning regulations but also on predictability, clarity, administrative capacity, and stakeholder confidence in the development review process.

Introduction and Background

Prince George's County has experienced substantial growth and transformation in recent years, accompanied by increasing emphasis on redevelopment, transit-oriented growth, housing diversification, economic competitiveness, and implementation of broader County planning priorities. In response to changing development patterns and evolving planning objectives, the County adopted a comprehensive new Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations intended to modernize land use controls, improve consistency, and better align development outcomes with adopted plans and policy priorities.

The transition from the prior ordinance to the new regulatory framework created an unusual and analytically valuable circumstance. During the transition period, applicants retained the ability to elect review under either the prior zoning ordinance or the newly adopted framework. This temporary dual-system environment created an opportunity to examine how stakeholders responded when given regulatory choice.

Understanding these choices is important for several reasons. First, applicant behavior can reveal embedded incentives and disincentives within zoning systems that may not be immediately visible through ordinance language alone. Second, implementation challenges during ordinance transitions often reveal areas where additional clarification, process improvements, or administrative support may be needed. Third, understanding how development outcomes align with County planning objectives provides insight into whether regulatory systems are functioning as intended.

This report examines approximately 100 development applications reviewed during the ordinance transition period between April 1, 2022 and April 1, 2025. The analysis seeks to understand the motivations influencing ordinance selection, the outcomes associated with those choices, and the broader implications for planning policy and implementation in Prince George's County.

More specifically, the report addresses the following questions:

1. What factors influenced applicant decisions to proceed under either the prior or new zoning ordinance?

2. What patterns emerged across project type, location, scale, and development characteristics?
3. To what extent did development outcomes align with County planning goals and ordinance intent?
4. What implementation barriers, challenges, or missed opportunities emerged during the transition period?
5. What policy or administrative recommendations may strengthen future ordinance implementation?

The findings are intended to support Prince George's County planning staff, elected officials, and stakeholders in evaluating lessons learned from the ordinance transition period and identifying opportunities to improve future implementation efforts.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method policy analysis approach focused on a cross-section of approximately 100 development applications reviewed by Prince George's County during the ordinance transition period between April 1, 2022 and April 1, 2025.

The analysis consisted of several complementary components outlined in the following paragraphs.

Document Review and Case Analysis

Students reviewed development application materials, staff reports, entitlement documentation, planning analyses, publicly available records, and related materials associated with individual cases. Additional information was collected using PGAtlas and related County planning resources to identify project characteristics, zoning classifications, development context, and application outcomes.

Cases were reviewed to identify patterns in project type and scale, geographic location, existing and proposed zoning classifications, selection of prior versus new ordinance pathways, timing and entitlement considerations, development outcomes, alignment with County planning goals, and administrative or procedural barriers.

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Rather than evaluating cases solely in isolation, this report synthesizes student findings across the full sample to identify recurring themes, incentives, behavioral patterns, and implementation dynamics. Cases were grouped into emerging typologies reflecting recurring applicant motivations and development circumstances.

These typologies included, but were not limited to:

1. Strategic grandfathering decisions
2. Certainty-seeking behavior
3. Flexibility-seeking under the new ordinance
4. Hybrid transition strategies
5. High-alignment implementation cases
6. Missed opportunity or friction-point cases

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study reflects a cross-sectional review of cases rather than a comprehensive examination of all development activity during the transition period. Second, applicant motivations were not always explicitly documented and, in some instances, were inferred through case context, timing, and available documentation. Third, ordinance implementation continued evolving during portions of the study period, meaning applicant decisions were made under changing conditions.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide meaningful insight into the relationship between ordinance design, implementation, and applicant behavior during an important period of regulatory transition.

Findings and Case Typologies

Key Findings

Analysis of development applications reviewed during the zoning ordinance transition period revealed several recurring patterns regarding applicant behavior, ordinance selection, implementation challenges, and alignment with County planning goals. While project-specific circumstances varied considerably, the cases collectively demonstrate that applicant decisions were shaped by a combination of regulatory certainty, timing, flexibility, project feasibility, and perceived implementation risk.

Importantly, the findings suggest that ordinance selection was rarely ideological or categorical. Rather, applicants generally approached the decision strategically, weighing project-specific costs, risks, timelines, and opportunities under each framework. In many instances, the choice reflected a broader assessment of development feasibility rather than a simple preference for either the prior or new ordinance.

Finding 1: Regulatory Certainty Frequently Drove Applicant Decision-Making

One of the most consistent findings across reviewed cases was the importance of regulatory certainty and predictability in applicant decision-making. Many applicants elected to proceed under the prior ordinance because it represented a known regulatory environment with

established interpretations, familiar entitlement pathways, and reduced implementation uncertainty.

For projects already in planning or early entitlement stages, the prior ordinance often provided a level of predictability that reduced perceived development risk. Applicants and land use professionals frequently emphasized the importance of avoiding delays associated with interpretation questions, administrative uncertainty, or evolving implementation standards during the transition period.

In several cases, ordinance choice appeared to function as a risk management strategy rather than a substantive rejection of the goals or intent of the new zoning framework. The findings suggest that predictability and administrative consistency are essential to successful ordinance implementation. Even well-designed planning reforms may experience slower adoption if applicants perceive elevated procedural uncertainty.

Finding 2: Grandfathering and Timing Incentives Influenced Development Behavior

The timing of applications emerged as another important determinant of ordinance selection. Grandfathering provisions and transition timelines created strong incentives for some applicants to accelerate filings under the prior ordinance before deadlines expired.

This pattern was particularly evident among projects already in predevelopment or advanced planning stages, where applicants had already incurred significant costs related to site planning, entitlement strategy, or legal positioning. For these applicants, changing regulatory frameworks midstream introduced uncertainty regarding project assumptions and financial feasibility.

In other cases, applicants appeared to strategically sequence submissions to preserve optionality, allowing projects to maintain flexibility while implementation practices under the new ordinance matured. The main implication is that transition periods can unintentionally incentivize short-term filing behavior that may not fully align with long-term planning objectives. Counties undertaking future regulatory transitions should consider how timing structures influence applicant incentives.

Finding 3: The New Ordinance Offered Meaningful Opportunities but Introduced Transitional Friction

The analysis also identified cases where applicants successfully utilized the new ordinance to advance projects aligned with County planning priorities, including redevelopment, mixed-use activity, housing diversification, and transit-supportive growth.

Several projects appeared to benefit from updated development standards, greater flexibility in design, or improved alignment with adopted planning goals. In these cases, the new ordinance functioned as intended by encouraging development outcomes more closely aligned with broader County objectives.

However, the transition period also introduced implementation friction. In some instances, applicants encountered uncertainty related to interpretation, procedural sequencing, administrative expectations, or evolving implementation practices. These challenges occasionally contributed to delays, confusion, or reliance on prior ordinance pathways. The implication is that implementation capacity matters as much as ordinance design. Successful modernization depends not only on policy content but also on training, communication, consistency, and administrative clarity.

Finding 4: Alignment with County Planning Goals Varied Across Cases

Many reviewed projects demonstrated meaningful alignment with County priorities related to economic development, revitalization, mixed-use activity, transit-oriented development, and housing supply expansion. However, the degree of alignment varied substantially across cases.

Some projects appeared highly consistent with broader planning goals while others reflected more incremental or legacy development patterns that were less aligned with emerging County priorities. In certain cases, ordinance selection itself appeared to shape the degree of policy alignment by affecting design flexibility, density assumptions, or permitted uses.

The findings suggest that ordinance transitions create important opportunities to reinforce desired development outcomes but may also reveal gaps between adopted planning goals and implementation realities. The implication is that monitoring systems should be developed to better assess whether regulatory changes are producing intended land use outcomes over time.

Finding 5: Process Complexity and Administrative Friction Influenced Outcomes

Across multiple cases, recurring concerns emerged regarding procedural complexity, interpretation consistency, and administrative coordination. While these issues were often expected during a major ordinance transition, they nonetheless influenced applicant behavior and perceptions of implementation risk. Several recurring implementation concerns included interpretation uncertainty, procedural sequencing confusion, administrative timing challenges, coordination across agencies or departments, and evolving expectations regarding compliance under the new ordinance.

Although many of these issues may diminish over time as institutional familiarity improves, the findings suggest that implementation support mechanisms remain important during periods of regulatory transition. The implication is that implementation planning should be treated as an essential component of major zoning reform rather than a secondary administrative consideration.

Case Typologies

The analysis identified several recurring case typologies that help explain how applicants navigated the ordinance transition period. While not all cases fit neatly into a single category, these typologies provide a useful framework for understanding broader behavioral patterns.

Typology 1: Strategic Grandfathering Cases

These projects deliberately pursued review under the prior ordinance to preserve existing entitlement assumptions, avoid procedural uncertainty, or maintain project feasibility. Common characteristics included projects already in advanced planning stages, significant sunk costs, time-sensitive development schedules, and preference for established regulatory expectations. These cases often reflected rational risk minimization rather than resistance to planning reform.

Typology 2: Certainty-Seeking Cases

Applicants in this category prioritized predictability and administrative familiarity. Rather than pursuing perceived regulatory advantages, these applicants sought the entitlement pathway with the clearest expectations and lowest uncertainty. Common characteristics included moderate project complexity, reliance on familiar professional teams, limited tolerance for entitlement delays, and preference for tested review pathways.

Typology 3: Flexibility-Seeking or Opportunity-Oriented Cases

Some applicants embraced the new ordinance because it provided advantages related to design flexibility, land use compatibility, redevelopment potential, or alignment with evolving County priorities. Common characteristics included mixed-use or redevelopment projects, transit-oriented development opportunities, adaptive reuse or infill contexts, and applicants seeking innovative site planning options. These cases often demonstrated stronger alignment with the intended goals of ordinance modernization.

Typology 4: Transitional Hybrid Cases

These cases reflected projects that navigated both systems or experienced changing circumstances during the transition period. Common characteristics included amendments or revisions during review, procedural ambiguity, evolving implementation practices, and adaptive entitlement strategies. These projects reveal the complexities associated with real-world ordinance transitions and highlight areas where implementation clarity may be improved.

Typology 5: High-Alignment Cases

High-alignment cases represented projects that closely advanced County planning goals while effectively utilizing available regulatory tools. Common characteristics included consistency with adopted plans, redevelopment or reinvestment objectives, multimodal accessibility, housing diversification, and strong design integration. These cases provide useful examples of how ordinance intent can successfully translate into development outcomes.

Typology 6: Missed Opportunity or Friction Cases

Finally, several cases illustrated situations where implementation challenges, procedural barriers, or ordinance limitations may have reduced alignment with County priorities or constrained project outcomes. Common characteristics included excessive uncertainty, delayed decision-making, limited flexibility, inconsistent interpretation, or missed redevelopment opportunities. These cases are particularly important because they help identify where future administrative improvements or ordinance refinements may be warranted.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that applicant behavior during the transition period reflected rational responses to changing regulatory conditions rather than simple resistance or endorsement of planning reform. The results reinforce the importance of administrative predictability, clear implementation guidance, and ongoing monitoring to ensure that zoning modernization efforts achieve intended policy outcomes.

More broadly, the transition period highlights that successful planning reform depends not only on regulatory language, but also on implementation capacity, stakeholder confidence, and the perceived reliability of development review systems.

Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest that Prince George's County's zoning ordinance transition period generated important lessons regarding applicant behavior, implementation dynamics, and regulatory effectiveness. While many outcomes aligned with broader planning goals, the analysis also revealed opportunities to improve predictability, implementation consistency, and long-term monitoring.

To strengthen future ordinance implementation and improve alignment between development outcomes and County objectives, this report recommends a combination of **short-term administrative improvements, medium-term ordinance refinements, and long-term performance monitoring strategies**. Many of these recommendations may already be underway within the County, but these recommendations are provided here based solely on the student work and without any direct interviews with internal planning employees.

Short-Term Recommendations (0–12 Months)

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Implementation Guidance and Applicant Communication

A recurring theme across reviewed cases was the importance of predictability during periods of regulatory transition. Applicants frequently cited uncertainty regarding interpretation, sequencing, or administrative expectations when navigating the new ordinance. To reduce friction and improve confidence in the development review process, the County should expand

existing implementation guidance materials, including plain-language ordinance summaries, frequently asked questions, process flowcharts, case examples illustrating successful implementation, and updated staff interpretation guidance. The County should also consider periodic stakeholder briefings for applicants, attorneys, and development professionals to communicate emerging best practices and recurring implementation issues. The expected outcome is reduced uncertainty, improved consistency, and increased confidence in the development review process.

Recommendation 2: Improve Administrative Consistency Across Review Processes

Several cases highlighted concerns regarding interpretation consistency and procedural expectations during the transition period. While implementation challenges are expected during major regulatory shifts, inconsistent interpretation can unintentionally discourage adoption of new systems. The County should establish clearer internal review protocols and interdepartmental coordination mechanisms to ensure greater consistency in ordinance implementation. Potential actions include cross-department staff calibration sessions, periodic implementation reviews, standardized interpretation guidance, and shared internal reference materials for recurring ordinance questions. The expected outcome of this recommendation is more predictable and efficient entitlement processes.

Recommendation 3: Develop a Transitional Implementation Toolkit

Future ordinance transitions would benefit from a formalized transition management strategy. The County should consider developing a transition toolkit that includes implementation timelines, stakeholder communication strategies, decision trees for ordinance applicability, grandfathering guidance, and implementation performance metrics. This recommendation is particularly important because transition periods may unintentionally alter applicant incentives and development behavior. The expected outcome is reduced implementation friction during future regulatory changes.

Medium-Term Recommendations (1–3 Years)

Recommendation 4: Conduct Targeted Ordinance Refinements Based on Implementation Experience

The findings suggest that implementation experiences provide valuable insight into where ordinance provisions may benefit from clarification or calibration. The County should periodically evaluate recurring waiver requests, procedural bottlenecks, interpretation inconsistencies, common entitlement delays, and areas where ordinance language produces unintended outcomes. Rather than pursuing broad ordinance restructuring, targeted

refinements focused on recurring friction points may generate the greatest benefit while preserving regulatory stability. The expected outcomes are improved ordinance functionality and reduced administrative inefficiencies.

Recommendation 5: Expand Monitoring of Development Outcomes Relative to County Goals

The transition period highlighted the importance of understanding whether development outcomes meaningfully align with adopted planning objectives. The County should develop a monitoring framework that evaluates outcomes related to transit-oriented development, housing production and diversification, mixed-use activity, redevelopment and reinvestment, economic competitiveness, and equity and geographic distribution of development. This system would help determine whether ordinance reforms are achieving intended policy outcomes over time. The expected outcome is improved evidence-based planning and policy evaluation.

Recommendation 6: Institutionalize Stakeholder Feedback Mechanisms

The transition period revealed the value of practitioner perspectives regarding ordinance implementation. Prince George's County should consider establishing recurring stakeholder feedback opportunities involving planning staff, developers and applicants, land use attorneys, community stakeholders, and implementation specialists. A structured feedback mechanism could help identify implementation challenges before they become systemic barriers. The expected outcomes combine opportunities for continuous improvement and stronger stakeholder confidence.

Long-Term Recommendations (3–5 Years)

Recommendation 7: Establish a Zoning Performance Dashboard

The County should consider developing a public-facing zoning performance dashboard that tracks entitlement timelines, ordinance pathway utilization, geographic development patterns, project approval outcomes, and alignment with planning priorities. This approach would improve transparency and provide policymakers with data necessary to evaluate implementation success. The expected outcome would be greater accountability, transparency, and performance-based planning.

Recommendation 8: Conduct a Post-Implementation Ordinance Assessment

Following a sufficient implementation period, the County should undertake a formal assessment of ordinance performance. This assessment should evaluate whether intended development patterns emerged, applicant experiences under the new ordinance, implementation bottlenecks, unintended consequences, and opportunities for targeted improvements. The

transition period provides a valuable baseline against which future outcomes can be measured. The expected outcome would be long-term policy refinement informed by empirical evidence.

Overarching Recommendation

The most important lesson emerging from this analysis is that **successful zoning reform depends not only on regulatory language, but also on implementation quality, administrative predictability, and stakeholder confidence**.

Modernized ordinances are most effective when supported by clear guidance, predictable review processes, institutional consistency, and ongoing evaluation. Prince George's County has an opportunity to leverage lessons from the transition period to strengthen future implementation efforts and improve alignment between desired planning outcomes and development realities.

Conclusion

The transition to Prince George's County's new Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations represents one of the County's most consequential land use policy changes in recent years. The transition period between 2022 and 2025 created a unique opportunity to evaluate how applicants, landowners, attorneys, and planning professionals responded when given a choice between legacy and modernized regulatory systems.

The findings suggest that applicant decisions were shaped less by opposition or preference regarding a particular ordinance and more by strategic assessments of certainty, timing, flexibility, and implementation risk. In many cases, applicants prioritized predictability and minimized perceived entitlement uncertainty, particularly when projects had already advanced through portions of the development process.

At the same time, the analysis identified numerous examples where the new ordinance supported development outcomes aligned with County goals, including redevelopment, mixed-use activity, housing diversification, and transit-supportive growth. These findings demonstrate that the ordinance has meaningful potential to advance broader County planning priorities when supported by effective implementation practices.

However, the transition period also revealed important implementation lessons. Administrative clarity, consistency in interpretation, communication, and institutional capacity emerged as critical determinants of applicant confidence and regulatory effectiveness. Even well-designed planning reforms may experience slower adoption if implementation uncertainty remains high.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings suggest that zoning modernization should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a singular policy event. Ordinance effectiveness depends not only on the quality of adopted regulations, but also on continued monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and willingness to refine implementation practices over time.

Prince George's County is well positioned to build upon lessons learned during this transition period. By strengthening implementation systems, improving predictability, and monitoring development outcomes, the County can further align regulatory frameworks with long-term planning goals while fostering a more transparent, effective, and resilient development review process.

Ultimately, this study reinforces a broader lesson applicable beyond Prince George's County: successful planning reform depends not only on what regulations require, but also on how they are implemented, interpreted, and experienced in practice.

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