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Reality Check *Plus* Event in Hagerstown Focuses on Western Maryland Challenges *Exercise About Affordable Housing, Jobs, Growth Patterns*

June 2, 2006 (Hagerstown, Md.) – A diverse group of approximately 120 elected officials, government staff and community, civic and business leaders from Allegany, Frederick, Garrett and Washington counties today participated in an unprecedented dialogue about the pressing challenges facing the future of Western Maryland as part of the day-long **Reality Check *Plus*** exercise at Hagerstown Community College. Planned and hosted by a unique coalition of nearly 150 nonprofit, community and private sector organizations statewide, the June 2nd **Reality Check *Plus*** event explored and fostered collective visioning about growth in Western Maryland and in the state overall.

During the morning, approximately 120 individuals — including elected officials, government staff and community, civic and business leaders from throughout Western Maryland — participated in an exercise using blocks to represent the increment of new homes and jobs projected to come to the four-county region by 2030. Invitees from across Western Maryland were selected by the Western Maryland **Reality Check *Plus*** organizing committee specifically to represent all stakeholder interests throughout Allegany, Frederick, Garrett and Washington counties.

Participants in the morning exercise identified a number of guiding principles for their table discussions, which included:

- Respect and continue to protect already protected forests, green fields and other environmental areas (10 of 12 tables)
- Focus new development around existing infrastructure (9 of 12 tables)
- Support higher density development within existing communities or within Priority Funding Areas (8 of 12 tables)
Encourage more infill development (1 of 12) and more mixed use development (1 of 12 tables)
- Build new housing closer to where existing or future jobs are located (6 of 12 tables)
- Protect viable agricultural lands, particularly cohesive, contiguous blocks of quality farmland (6 of 12 tables)

The afternoon session, which was open to the public, focused on the implications of growth and the implementation of a common vision. It began with a keynote address by Tom Hylton, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and host of an hour-long public television documentary called *Save Our Land, Save Our Towns*, which has been aired nationwide on more than 100 PBS stations. Hylton is president of Save Our Land, Save Our Towns Inc., a non-profit corporation that is an advocate of traditional towns that house people of all ages, races, and incomes.

“There is beginning to be a recognition that we can’t keep going on like this,” said Hylton. “There’s a realization that if we want to save our forests and our farmlands, we need to return to the development patterns of our towns and cities.”

The afternoon concluded with a discussion about how the group’s mutual vision could be implemented. Participants, asked to list their top ideas, recommended four strategies to implement the mutual vision:

- Find ways to raise the money needed for infrastructure, roads, rail, sewer in order to manage and support the growth that is headed to the region;
- The need to take a more regional approach by facilitating better cooperation among the four counties and between municipalities, counties and the state;
- The need to educate elected officials and the public about land use issues, the impact of development and alternative strategies for managing growth; and,
- The need for municipalities and counties to get serious about making their policies and laws more effective in accomplishing their goals, whether it is to protect green space or support denser development within designated growth areas.

These ideas will become part of the larger **Reality Check *Plus*** implementation effort, to include more in-depth research, and related education and advocacy work.

Next steps for **Reality Check Plus** will include creation of a Blueprint for Maryland based on the outcomes from the June 2nd Western Maryland exercise and the two ensuing Reality Check Plus exercises in Central Maryland and in Southern Maryland, as well as the preceding May 25th event on the Eastern Shore. A detailed implementation strategy will then be developed over the coming months, based on the ideas generated at each of the four regional exercises, that will feature the three key elements of research about policy and program options, issue-related education and advocacy for policy change.

Led statewide by the Urban Land Institute's Baltimore District Council, the University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education, and 1000 Friends of Maryland, **Reality Check Plus** brings together a diverse group of organizations and various stakeholders, including politicians, developers, environmentalists, and business and civic leaders to consider Maryland's future growth

A broad-based coalition of nearly 150 sponsors and supporting organizations is guiding this effort, including the Home Builders Association of Maryland, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, The Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, The American Institute of Architects - Baltimore, the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, the Greater Baltimore Committee, St. Mary's College and the Mid-Shore Community Foundation, among many others.

A number of other jurisdictions around the country have already launched local or regional visioning exercises – Envision Utah in the Salt Lake City region; Blueprint in Sacramento, California; and Reality Check in Los Angeles, Dallas Ft. Worth and Washington, D.C. What distinguishes **Reality Check Plus** from previous visioning exercises in Maryland is that it is privately led, statewide and action-oriented.

For more information about **Reality Check Plus**, contact Beth Offenbacker at 703.933.0520, ext. 202. Our website, www.realitycheckmaryland.org, provides additional information about both the overall **Reality Check Plus** exercise concept and specifically the June 2nd Western Maryland event.

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