

How much growth is REALLY needed?

Your editorial (3/26/08) on growth in St. Mary's made a number of interesting points, one of which seems, to me, to merit discussion. As a biologist (researcher and educator) I know that organisms do not always grow in order to remain healthy and that unregulated growth is often associated with acceleration of the normal processes by which death comes to all of us. Your assertion that "if a community is not growing it is dying" is a variant on a theme often used to justify expansion of a community (more businesses, more jobs, more people, more homes and so forth). But the notion of justifying growth this way is questionable. I would argue that while a community must be changing (or adapting to changing realities) in order to remain vibrant, growth - as measured by specific numbers - is not necessarily the only, or best, way to assure the desired vibrancy of a community. Furthermore, even if one accepts that some growth is desirable, we need to be very thoughtful about how we decide on the 'target' numbers by which we guide the growth of our communities. You could do us all a considerable service by publishing some analytical and investigative reporting on how desired growth rates are best determined. For example, if we start from a baseline premise of zero growth and then ask how much more than zero growth (per year, or decade) is desirable, we can engage in a discussion of the pros/cons of each type and amount of growth. How do we define growth? What are the limits to growth and what are the long term costs of growth? Who determines what percentage growth is 'good' or necessary and how do the deciders arrive at their numbers? What is the reasoning that leads to the assertion that residential growth of 2.25% per year is the correct breakpoint between a stagnating community and one that is in danger of runaway development? I suspect that each of us might come up with a slightly different number and small differences (say 2% rather than 2.25%) have significant implications. If one wishes to argue for less growth (or more), what are the factors that one should consider and how should one weight those factors in presenting an argument for less (or more) growth? From my experience in other communities, I have come to believe that we should be striving for less growth and focussing more on sustaining our communities at the size they have reached. By what analytical process can one justify a specific number for the percent of growth one is proposing? And how can any such proposed number be justified in a way that the the largest number of members of the community understand the 'logic' and agree that the proposed extent of growth is the wisest target we can come up with at this time?

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