

# Columbia, Maryland—A New Town for America

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•THE FIRST QUESTION which must be answered is "Why a Columbia? Why a new town?" I don't have to tell you about urban sprawl or the ugliness of the American countryside. The Baltimore-Washington area with its current population of four million will be called on to house six million people by 1980. The corridor between Baltimore and Washington, where the Beltways are only 21 miles apart, will house a half million people alone. So Columbia, with a population of 110,000 or 125,000, is really a drop in the bucket.

The question also arises: "Why haven't we had more new towns?" There has been no leadership in the United States concerned with the creation of new communities. Not a single state has made any serious efforts to propose or to plan them. There has been no leadership in the large cities which have feared the possibility of new towns drawing off their middle-income white-collar people, their better industries and their leadership. In general, it is unlikely, I think, that we are going to find much leadership from local government. Such important and inspirational documents of regional leadership as the great Year 2000 Plan for the National Capital area of the Metro-Towns Plan for Baltimore or the Year 2000 Plan for the Denver metropolitan area are rare exceptions. The lack of leadership is an upsetting thing for planners and the people concerned with the future form and quality of urban development, but it is a fact. However, I do think that there are signs of improvement. We are now accomplishing things in urban renewal and in the poverty program that planners and other social scientists have been talking about for a quarter of a century. The present recognition of this cultural lag will certainly result in positive public leadership in the field of new communities in the next decade or so.

The other reason why we have had so few major new communities is the fact that no one in the private sector of the economy really has had the money to build them. There are no General Motors or General Electrics in the home building industry. The largest home builders in the United States are sadly undercapitalized. There are very few people who have the money necessary to get a project like this off the ground.

One of the things we've been asked is why we located our new town in Howard County, which is between Montgomery and Baltimore Counties. Our staff did considerable study up and down the Megalopolis looking for land to meet a handful of relatively simple criteria.

First, the site had to be located in the "magnetic field" of a growing metropolitan area. It could not be in an isolated area because it is impossible to sell houses where there are no job opportunities. It had to be a location where it was actually possible for homeowners to commute to work and vice versa.

Secondly, it had to be in a location where there was either an existing or a planned major transportation system. By this I mean not railroads or airlines but highways. Our studies led us to conclude that Howard County was on the verge, with the powerful and extensive Maryland state highway program, of being crisscrossed with some of the really great highways planned in the area, including I-95.

The third criterion was that the development had to be in a location where the choice was not whether to develop or not to develop, that is, an area which would develop with us or without us. One of the points of our proposed strategy in starting a new town from scratch was that we had to be able to buy the land and not take the chance of being turned down on the application for zoning. The real issue before the local community had to be what kind of development they were going to be faced with: sprawl or planned

community. Although Howard County had only 45,000 people, it was located between two fantastically growing metropolitan areas. Washington had recently achieved the distinction of being the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States, and Baltimore ranked ninth.

It also had to be in an area where land could be acquired without the power of eminent domain. We had to be able to buy sufficient acreage in a more or less contiguous area with only "a suitcase full of money." It had to be an area where we could buy land without pressure, without any fast tactics, and with secrecy. Most important and the greatest discipline of all in new town development, the land had to be acquired at a price which would allow parts of it to be held throughout the 18-year development period.

One of the things that stops major new developments is the cost of borrowing money. Every invested dollar in America must pay interest in one form or another. If land is acquired at too high a price in 1965, by 1975 when the project is only two-thirds finished, the carrying charges will make the land uneconomical and unsatisfactory as an investment. I'm not sure that Federal financial assistance will change that picture very much, although I think that the potential use of eminent domain for a new town development may help a little.

Behind our motivation to try to build, as our company calls it, a better mousetrap was the basic philosophy of our organization that if you build something to high standards with a high quality of design, construction, maintenance, management, and promotion, it will retain its competitive value. This also requires better management, more planning skill, and more overhead, but in the long run, it will be well worth it.

One of the things we had to do after locating the site was to find a source of funds. I mentioned before that no company or no individual who is interested in new town development has the kind of money required. Mr. Rouse, our president, was able to interest a major American life insurance company and as a result of their seeing the responsibility that a major pool of investments funds has in urbanizing America as well as the financial opportunity, they put up approximately \$23,500,000.00 to finance the project. We acquired 15,650 acres (larger than Manhattan Island) in 9 months for \$23,500,000.00.

The question was then what to do next. Not that we hadn't been thinking about it, but we were not really free to proceed publicly at all because the land had to be acquired under a cloak of secrecy.

One of the first decisions made was to hire our own planning staff. We felt that the planning, design, construction, and coordination of a community as large as this, as extensive in terms of time and complexity, could not be done by outside consultants in the usual fashion. This is not to say that we did not use consultants. As a matter of fact, we have over 30 in various fields. For example, we had to have aerial maps made of approximately 25,000 acres at fairly large-scale contours to know what we really had. We soon found out that we were the owners of 4,000 acres of woods; our land had three major stream valleys, obviously in need of protection from damage; and we had about 99 percent productive land which was enormously impressive in its beauty, its rolling topography and its general quality. We went through the normal motions of any responsible planners in looking at all the physical attributes and problems of the area. We found that Howard County is occupied mostly by farmers, former farmers, and exurbanites, meaning that most of the people who have moved to Howard County in the last 15 years moved there to get away from the city. However, the most important thing we did was to take the time and spend the money to find out how to plan a new city.

If a roomful of people were given a map with 15,000 acres on it and a general set of requirements, each person would come up with a different design for the town. Each would have different ideas about what kinds of facilities there should be, how the road system ought to work, how the school system ought to work, how the communities ought to be organized, what the city needed, what it ought to look like, and so forth. Most of the plans would probably be pretty good. We decided that this is not how to go about planning a city. We felt that a new city needed to be planned from the people up. We were convinced that most cities are largely unresponsive to people's needs. American society is plagued with serious problems of crime, delinquency, loneliness, despair, economic difficulties, fears about child-rearing, anxious and neurotic housewives,

commuting fathers, and children unfulfilled because of the lack of opportunity. And this is not necessarily confined to the inner city; it includes the suburbs. Typical sprawling suburbs in the United States only become really liveable after they've been developed for 10 or 15 years. A house on a quarter-acre lot and a school at the end of the street do not result in a full life. We believed there is a far better alternative and set out to find out what it was.

Our first thought was to bring in behavioral scientists. However, we soon found that we could read most of what they had to say, and we were very anxious for the planning of this town to come from unfrozen minds. So we assembled a rather distinguished group of relatively unknown names in a wide variety of fields, such as health, education, and the growing field of leisure. We even had an expert on women, one of the technical secretaries of the President's Commission on Women, to discuss the many problems of women, a major consideration in the planning of our town. Also included were a professor from Michigan specializing in problems of human communication and an expert in suburban sociology. The team was guided by a social psychologist from Harvard. In addition, we had a lot of good hardware people, experts in local government, some outstanding transportation people, urban economists, and some real wonders in consumer trends.

This group was called together with the assignment to plan the most perfect town possible. We asked them to give us their best thinking on how we could do it. Although retaining the responsibility for planning the town, we said to them: "How do we attack the problems we have to face? How do we go about it? What kinds of guidelines can you give us? Tell us what insights you can give us into the opportunities that are before us." We set a half dozen goals for this town which are not earthshaking, but which we feel are absolutely essential, and we expect to achieve them.

One of the things we were met with in the county was the real fear that Columbia as a rapidly urbanizing area would create a disaster in county finances. We have established as a goal and made the promise that we will come forward with a system to protect the remainder of the county from additional tax burdens as a result of Columbia. The proposed solution is a public district which would carry on those functions which an urban society needs but which rural people neither want nor will pay for.

Our plan had to preserve major areas of permanent open space. One of the most critical issues facing suburbia today is the almost total inability to set aside large areas of open space before they are overrun and developed. We promised to preserve lakes, parks, stream valleys, tree masses, and all the natural amenities that are there on the land.

One of our development principles is that Columbia must be a truly balanced community. It is one of our mottoes that "everyone who lives there will be able to work there and everyone who works there will be able to live there." This, of necessity, requires a very broad range of housing prices, types, and styles; this is not going to be just an upper-middle-income community but a true city of variety. At the same time, we are satisfied that we will attract a wide range of employment. Of course, we do not expect to attract extremely heavy industry because there is no immediately convenient rail access or deep water. We have promised to set the highest possible standards of beauty, safety and convenience. We expect to have strict architectural and aesthetic control over commercial areas, residential areas and roadsides. One of the reasons Howard County has not developed residentially and industrially is that there are almost no water or sewer lines. We are bringing major utilities into the area for the first time at extremely high cost, but we are pledged to public water and sewerage rather than a continuation of the well and septic tank system.

The plan for Columbia calls for some 30,000 dwelling units to be constructed over 15 years. This requires reaching a building rate of 2,500 to 3,000 units a year during the peak years, nearly twice the number of dwelling units built in the Baltimore-Washington area by any one developer in the same period of time. We have set aside more than 3,500 acres of permanent open space in the form of stream valleys, parks, playing fields, playgrounds, riding trails, hiking trails, golf courses, small parks, and so forth. Sixteen hundred acres are scheduled for employment centers, resulting in 2 to 3 million square feet of industry which will, of course, help to create and maintain

that important economic balance the community demands. There will be  $1\frac{1}{2}$  million square feet of commercial space, 70 schools, 50 churches, a completely separated pathway system with underpasses and overpasses, a community college, a hospital, a wide variety of institutions, and some Federal employment.

There are important social links between the stores and the community center, and between the high school auditorium and the library. One of our pioneer attempts in the field of libraries is a common library system for school and community with its double benefits. The planned school system departs considerably from the present county system and is naturally meeting some resistance. We are urging much smaller schools, and many more of them, on the principle that if there are ten school newspapers instead of three in a community, there will be ten editors and more people participating. The exchange of a few advanced facilities for a higher level of participation in the school system and in the community is well worthwhile.

At the neighborhood level, the same principles apply. There is considerable correlation among all the elements planned for the neighborhood center. The elementary school, adjacent nursery school, tot lot, child-care center, a swimming pool, an outdoor eating terrace which becomes a teenage hangout part of the year, a little neighborhood store where a loaf of bread can be bought without having to drive 5 miles—all will become the vital heart of the smaller scale neighborhood community.

In the town center will be the major one-of-a-kind activities; the real downtown includes major retail and recreation facilities, gardens (like the Tivoli in Copenhagen), theatre, the main library, a hotel, restaurant, community college, a hospital, offices and, we hope, the U. S. Patent Office. We are putting a great deal of effort into having Route 29, which cuts our property in half, upgraded to a limited-access six-lane landscaped parkway. We have recently purchased three sites zoned for shopping centers for up to \$15,000 an acre just to take them off the map. We are satisfied that this is an important step and that the values in the community will be maintained and improved by wiping out roadside commercialism. We feel that once this is done (though of course we cannot buy everything), we will have eliminated the major eyesores and there will be real incentive in the local community and at the state highway level to make Route 29 a beautiful parkway.

On the basis of the major land uses, population densities, and employment figures for the town, Wilbur Smith and Associates reported the impact of this new town (in an area formerly assumed undeveloped) on the state highway system of Maryland. Their figures were combined with state calculations and I think we are going to have some very much improved highways as a result of this effort. Alan Voorhees and Associates were our transportation consultants throughout this effort and worked on the internal transportation system as well.

We presented our general plan to the County in November 1964, together with a new form of zoning which will make possible the development of a new town. As those familiar with typical zoning know, we cannot lay out every lot and block on 15,000 acres today. Yet we must have the overall development zoning approval, that is, the right to develop the 30,000 dwelling units, before we can put the first major sewer in the ground. This calls for an unusual obligation on the part of the local county government, especially for this county which has never really had to consider development on this scale. However, we are committing thousands of acres of developable land to an open space program, guaranteeing its preservation, and bringing in, through the sheer power and size of the community, a wide range of cultural, recreational, and commercial activities which the county would never be able to attract under normal circumstances.

We have fond hopes of acquiring the approval of the local government this spring, starting construction late in 1965, and having people move in early in 1966. The community is scheduled to be finished in 1980.

Today Columbia is just a plan on paper. Its soundness and its feasibility have been checked and tested for more than a year. Columbia is possible. Tomorrow it can become the finest community in America. It offers an opportunity for a strong and solidly financed corporation to begin a business undertaking within the discipline of good economics. If Columbia is completed as planned, it will make a profit. Thus, the incentive to succeed financially is a solid assurance that Columbia can and will be built as

planned. Columbia is an opportunity for the growth of America, a changed course from needless waste of the land, sprawl, disorder, congestion and mounting taxes to a direction of order, beauty, financial stability and a sincere concern for the growth of people.