

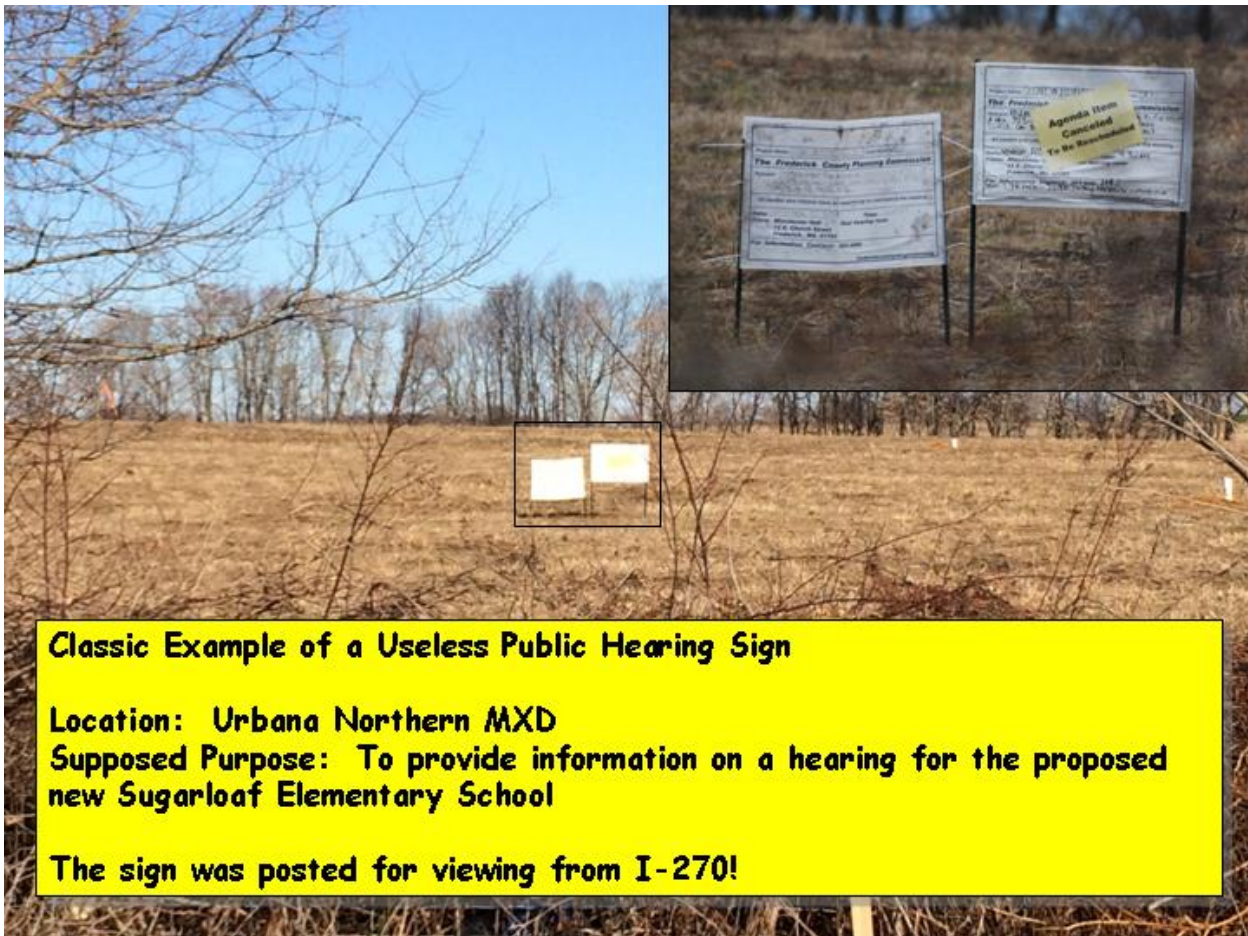
Testimony by Steven McKay, President of RALE, in Support of Bill 16-11

Good evening. I'm here tonight to speak in favor of Bill 16-11. In so doing, I will also encourage you to expand the scope of the bill both beyond comprehensive plan zoning changes to any zoning change requiring a public hearing, and to consider additional measures by which the County should seek to communicate this information to adjoining property owners and the surrounding community.

You may think that RALE is only concerned with the Monrovia Town Center but that's not quite right. MTC is certainly a central focus but we've been involved in a variety of development issues. Fundamentally, however, when I think about RALE, what I think of first and foremost is our mission to communicate and provide information to the community. From that perspective, this topic is central to our mission and has been of particular interest to me. In fact, I've hoped for just this opportunity to discuss these issues with you and to make these suggestions. You see I've attended many public hearings, I've searched for and found many posted signs, and looked – sometimes in vain – for the information that I needed in order to inform my neighbors. In the process, I've learned a few things that are very relevant to this bill.

Signage

Let's begin with signs. The bill extends the standard sign posting requirement to comprehensive plan zoning changes. Frankly, the type of signs and the way they are posted leaves a lot to be desired. I'll illustrate this with one of my favorite examples of my least favorite sign.



The graphic in my handout is two pictures of the same pair of signs posted for the Urbana Northern MXD. I took these photos from the shoulder of I-270. As you can see the signs were situated well back from the road, so far back, in fact, that I needed to use a 300mm lens to capture the close-up photo, let alone to actually read the sign. Needless to say, this sign was useless. It represented the blind adherence to a requirement that sometimes doesn't make much sense. You see the purpose of these signs should be to communicate information. When the public can't read the signs, then we have a failure to communicate.

And this isn't just about one silly sign facing 270. The problem is more widespread. Time and again, signs for MTC are posted along MD 80. This is a 40-50 mph roadway with no shoulder to pull off onto, and enough traffic such that the opportunities to stop and read or photograph the signs are challenging to say the least. The result – the signs aren't readable to most drivers. Fortunately, there are those among us that are motivated enough to stop where we can, walk back down the road, and take a photo for later review and for subsequent communication. I can recall similar problems on several portions of MD 75 and 355. I remember a really bad sign posted on Boyers Mill Rd. It was at a low spot on the road on a curve. The sight lines were terrible. The only space to pull off was probably a 100 yards away but frankly, I didn't feel it was safe to walk along the road from there. It took me probably half a dozen drive bys before I felt it safe enough to pause in my car long enough to take a photo without being rear-ended.

So placing signs at locations where a driver can safely stop to actually read the sign would be a good starting point. More fundamentally, however, is the type of signs that are posted. I used to work in the Tysons Corner area. I would see similar signs posted there that are twice the size of Frederick County's. Our signs need to be larger, but that shouldn't mean that you add more information. In fact, I would argue for less information. We need larger signs, using larger heavier print to convey just the essential information needed to know what is happening and when a hearing will take place. Most importantly, it should be easily readable by a driver going down the road. Most of our roads have no sidewalks and are not meant for pedestrian traffic. If we can't design signs that are more easily read by passing drivers, then I would argue what is the point of them beyond blind adherence to a pointless rule.

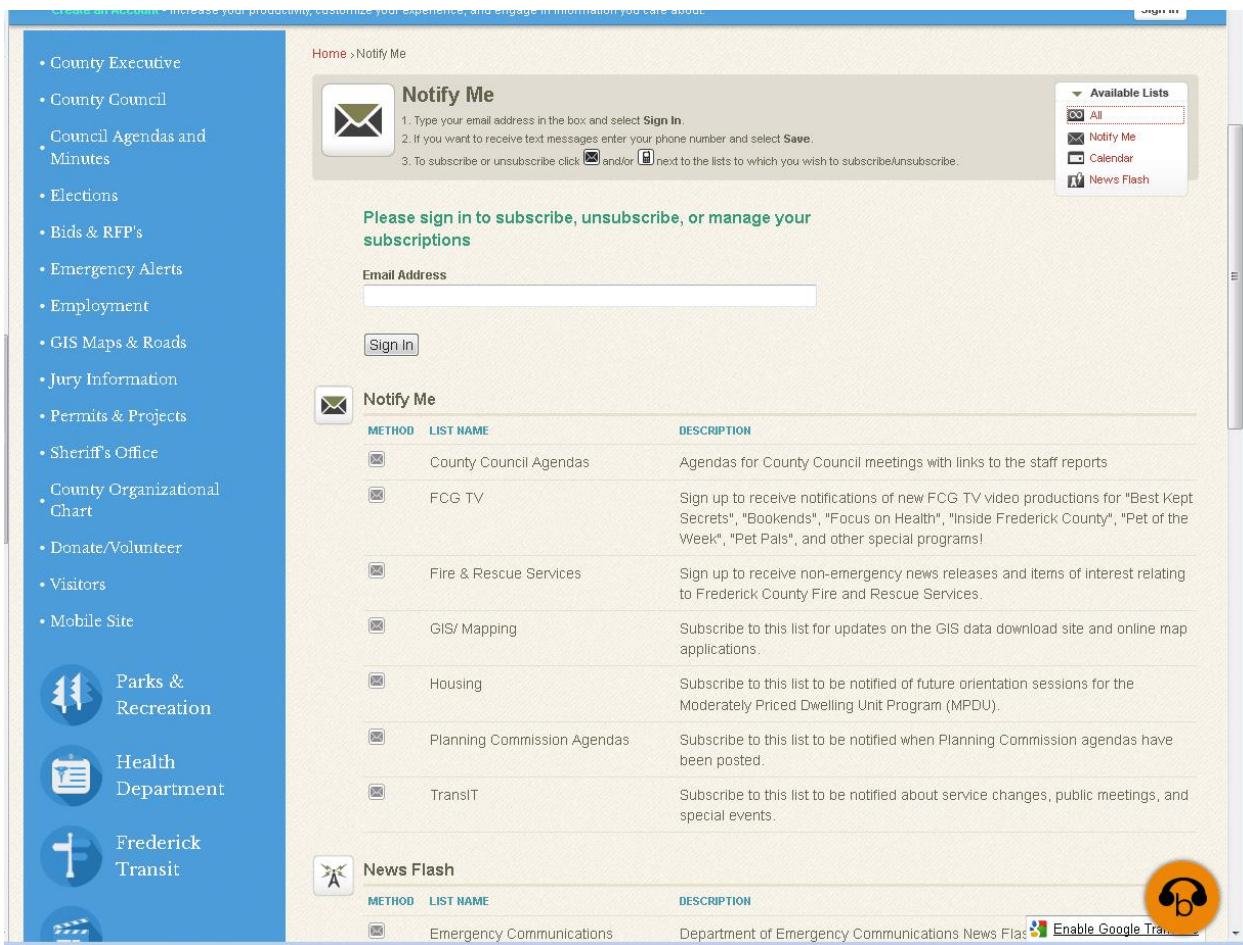
Moving Beyond Simple Newspaper Ads to Greater use of Social Media

The ordinance currently calls for posting the same information in a newspaper of general circulation – essentially the FNP. I don't know about you, but I read the FNP every day and I don't think I've ever once noticed an ad about a proposed zoning change. Despite being very interested in such things, I'll just never see those ads in the paper. When I read the paper – and I don't think I'm alone on this – my eyes go from headline to article or to the next headline. I ignore the ads. Posted zoning notices never merit a glance. With all due respect to the FNP, I just don't believe that it's an effective channel to communicate this information. I'm not saying that you shouldn't do it – I just don't think you should rely upon it as one of only three communication channels.

You have so many more options to communicate that information. The County has a website, Facebook pages, even Twitter accounts. For all I know, you have Instagram, too. Yet, none of these are being leveraged to communicate this information. It would take little effort and potentially be very beneficial to have easy to find pages on the website to post proposed zoning changes and public hearing notices. You need do no more than post a photo or graphic of the same sign placed at the property. You can subdivide the posts by zip code to make it easier for people to focus on changes only in their community. Dedicate a new Facebook page to these announcements and then automatically tweet new postings.

Each of these methods requires some degree of opt-in by residents, and I think that's appropriate. I'm not suggesting that you spam these announcements to everyone around the County. Focus the information to those that seek it out or who opt-in to receiving it. Any of these options would be an improvement – and none of them are currently being exploited.

The bill includes sending letters to adjoining property owners. Couldn't agree more ... but again, there's more that you can do. Are any of you familiar with the County webpage shown in the graphic that I included? This is an opt-in email service. You indicate which notices you want to receive, and you automatically get the emails. That's how I receive agenda notifications for your meetings and for the Planning Commission. It would be so simple to offer the same option for zoning changes and public hearings – either filtered by zip code or not. These are easy and inexpensive measures.



I don't know which of the ideas that I've mentioned need to be included in the ordinance or are more a matter of administrative change. You can decide that in consultation, perhaps, with Mr. Horn or the County Executive. I just know this – the bill currently includes the same old measures that the County has been using to communicate for a long time. These measures have limited impact and you can do so much more, so much more effectively, and at relatively little cost.

When RALE was started, it began with a simple purpose – to communicate information. Back in late 2012, Landsdale had been approved and the MTC application was being pushed forward to the staff. Nobody in the community knew what was going on. It became our job to tell them. The County can

and should do better. It starts with how you communicate these issues. It starts with larger signs that are easier to read from the road, and it includes leveraging social media and email. I'm sure there are other good ideas out there – but this would be a good start. Thank you.