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State agency backs annexation

By Alex Bridges

A state agency paved the way Monday for Front Royal to grow by more than 600 acres and potentially add up to 800 homes.

Warren County and Front Royal now must give residents another chance to speak about the proposed annexation. The town and county plan to hold public hearings on the voluntary settlement agreement that outlines the boundary adjustment and development of the property.

The Front Royal Limited Partnership filed a citizen-initiated annexation proposal with the Commission on Local Government in 2012 seeking to add 605 acres of undeveloped land it owns in Warren County to the town boundaries. More than a year later, leaders with Front Royal and Warren County crafted a voluntary settlement agreement with the developer that outlined both the incorporation of the land into the town and restrictions for future construction on the property.

The commission held a public hearing on the agreement in November and staff incorporated comments submitted by speakers into its work on the voluntary settlement agreement.

The commission adopted a staff report on the voluntary settlement agreement with two recommendations, said Zack Robbins, local government policy manager for the agency. The commission recommended that the town and county remove the Front Royal Limited Partnership as a party to the agreement.

Town and county officials must now revisit the new agreement and determine what changes, if any, they want to make to the document. Elected bodies need to adopt the new agreement, after holding separate public hearings. The Virginia Supreme Court will then appoint three judges to serve as a special panel to consider the agreement. Robbins said no timeline has been

set for the creation of the panel.

Town Manager Steven Burke said the public hearing for Front Royal likely would take place later this month or in early February.

State code only allows such agreements between localities and doesn't permit the inclusion of private entities as parties, Robbins said. Attorneys representing the town and county realized this and had already drafted a new agreement, Robbins said. Neither Town Council nor the Board of Supervisors has approved the revised agreement but the commission did look at the document.

Under the revised document, the responsibility for keeping intact the limitations on development of the property shifts from the owner to the town. Front Royal would require the developer to include proffers in any rezoning request, Robbins said.

The commission's second recommendation relates to the town's current effort to update its comprehensive plan.

"We were suggesting that, due to the size of the development and the potential impacts of the development, that the town really should incorporate this area into their analysis for the comprehensive plan," Robbins said.

The commission reviews the terms of the agreement to see how the deal aligns with the best interests of the town, the county and the area proposed for the annexation, Robbins explained. But the scope of the commission's work did not delve into the development issues raised by residents who spoke about the agreement and annexation. Staff, at the commission's request, included language in its report that noted the concerns raised by residents at the public hearing in November. As Robbins explained, most of those concerns should be addressed through rezoning process that would occur after the town annexes the property.

"We will consider that request and if our planning commission can expand the comprehensive plan to include that property then we will pursue that," Burke said.

The town official noted that the effort to review and update the comprehensive plan could continue well into 2015.

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