Future vision

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Optimism in wake of joint planning meeting *Planners eyeball Happy Creek area for urban development designation*



Let's get together and figure this thing out - but we don't have the authority, just some notions. County, foreground, and town planing commissions and staff ponder the future of growth in the community over the next 20 years.

By Roger Bianchini Warren County Report

On Nov. 19, the Town of Front Royal and Warren County Planning Commissions and staffs gathered for a little "let's get together" work session aimed at heightened communications and coordination as both entities plow their ways toward the future and what that future holds in store.

"The good news for the town and county is that growth has slowed so we can catch our breaths and get in step before the next wave comes," County Planning Chairman Mark Bower said near the meeting's outset.

And while it is true that the recession and ongoing downturn in the housing market have given municipal planners a little breathing room from grappling with 2,000-unit housing requests and 3-percent annual growth caps, that next wave Bower referenced is always just around the corner. In fact, the current Front Royal Limited Partnership rezoning re-

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We make traveling simple.... CALL today! 9 S. Charles Street • Front Royal, VA 22630 (540) 636-1402 • (800) 326-2728 Fax (540) 636-3808 www.PassagesTravel.com • info@passagestravel.com quest seeking an increase from a by-right maximum of 99, to 320 residential units on 149 acres of town land bordering another 700 or so vacant acres along the towncounty line off Happy Creek Road has been referenced as a pivotal moment in the planning future of both municipalities.

And that rezoning proposal was a major point of discussion as the two planning commissions pondered how to approach new state guidelines on the implementation of "Urban Development Areas." As revisited by town and county planning staffs, the UDA's are a state effort to focus future growth around existing municipal development and central utilities.

County Planning Commissioner, the ever-suspicious Harry Krum, worried that the state was taking local decision-making authority away from the municipalities most directly impacted by that growth. However, both County Administrator Doug Stanley and County Attorney Blair Mitchell addressed the upside of the state plan.

"What they are doing is trying to focus growth where existing utilities and development already exist in order to protect the farmland throughout the counties," Stanley pointed out. "The tough part is, if you live next door to where that development occurs, you might not be too happy," Stanley commented, with a nod to two Happy Creek area residents, Eva Challis and Ramona Bowden.

As the discussion proceed to where and when such UDA's might be placed as state timelines for enacting the new legislation approach, the northside where town utilities have been extended to facilitate commercial and industrial development was mentioned, as was the Happy Creek-Leach's Run area where the FRLP project is located.

Stanley referenced what is being termed a "new urbanism" resulting from the designation of urban development areas. "It's viewed as a place where people can live, work and play – kind of the way it used to be before cars …" he said. Mitchell pointed out only heretofore unplatted land can be designated as UDA's. "We need town cooperation to provide water and sewer," Mitchell pointed out of UDA's designated on county land.

In response to a question about Front Royal being exempted from UDA statutes due to its size, Mitchell explained, "That's correct. The county must adopt [UDA's] by July 1, 2011. The town doesn't have to at all."

Citing a past impasse between the town and county over the extension of central water and sewer across the Shenandoah River to Catlett Mountain, Krum pointed out, "The last time we asked for water and sewer the town didn't answer us for nine months."

"That is why cooperation is important," Mitchell pointed out. "I don't think the town wants to force the county to go into the water business – which is an alternative to cooperation."

"My point is, if we do it (designate UDA's), the town annex it – we don't have one garbage truck in the county," Krum pointed out of the town's ability to provide the type of services the county lacks to high-density areas typical of towns and cities.

Town Planning Commissioner Glenn Wood pointed to the ongoing negotiation on the FRLP project and stated that the town planners agreed in principal, that

All I Wanted to Know

By Kevin S. Engle Warren County Report

"If you'd like to pay off your loan, press 22. If you'd like to refinance, press 23. If you'd like the main menu, press 99." "Customer service," I said through clenched teeth, annoyed and frus-

trated that I'd been listening to these ##\$%%@# voice prompts for the past five minutes and was still no closer to where I wanted to be.

All I wanted to know was when my new payment booklet would be in the mail.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand that request. Let's start over. If you'd like to"

I couldn't take it anymore. "Customer service!" I yelled, ready to fight this stupid answering system.

"Please hold while your call is transferred."

"Finally," I said as sweat pored down my face and arms. When I get agitated, I sweat. I was agitated.

According to the letter I received last week, my mortgage was being transferred from one of the bank's subsidiaries to another. It was almost time for my next payment and I thought the new coupon booklet would be here by now.

"Hi, I'm Ms. Randolph," came the cheery voice on the other end of the phone, "how can I help you?"

"Thank goodness. A real human being," I muttered. "All I want to know is when I'll receive my new payment book in the mail. That's it."

"Sure, I can help you with that. Let me get some information first."

After giving her my address, phone

number, account number, blood type, what I was buying my wife for Christmas and the secret ingredients to Coca Cola, she found what she needed.

"I see your wife is the primary account holder on the mortgage. May I speak with her?"

The question struck fear in my heart. I knew where this conversation was going.

"No, she's not here."

Maybe, just maybe, she'd still answer my question. After all, all I wanted to know was when my payment book would arrive.

"I'm sorry Mr. Engle, but I can't discuss the account with you." "Rrrrrrrrrrrr!"

My hopes for success were quickly extinguished, like a fire hose dousing a candle. There wasn't a chance in hell Ms. Randolph was going to tell me anything.

But I pleaded my case anyway.

"Doesn't it count that I'm the one who signs the check every month?"

"We appreciate that very much Mr. Engle, but because of privacy concerns, I'm not allowed to discuss this account with anyone but Mrs. Engle."

Twenty-one minutes and thirty-nine seconds after dialing, I hung up in disgust, still without an answer to my simple question. And all I wanted to know

Oh screw it.

The author has a question about his car loan too. Maybe his wife should make that call.

- kevinengle456@comcast.net

"Sometimes it seems as if [council] walks up to the cliff, then walks back away, then walks back up, then walks back away. One of these days they're going to walk up to that cliff and jump off. – But what [direction] they decide, we don't know yet." - Town PC Chair David Gushee on development decisions

Future vision



County Planning Commissioner Harry Krum, right, was adamant that if it's going to be a town-like neighborhood with central utilities, it should be a part of the town. Krum's fellow county commissioner Tory Failmezger, paper in hand, ponders this thought as **County Building Official Dave Beahm listens.**

the Happy Creek area largely owned by FRLP - 750 acres in the town and county, with another 70 acres owned by Millennium Lotus - was a logical candidate for Urban Development Area designation. - "If there was a joint agreement on annexation of that area, we could focus growth there," Woods said.

County staff pointed out that approximately 900 undeveloped, unplatted acres in that area on both sides of Happy Creek Road could likely accommodate the next 20 years of growth in the community, even were the housing market to rebound and the

historical county top-end, 3-percent growth rate revisited.

"This points to why we need ongoing dialogue," Town Planning Commission Chairman David Gushee stated. Gushee revisited past statements on the town planners' dilemma in dealing with the FRLP proposal, which is illegal by current town zoning codes for the area. – "It was beyond our competence to solve. We sent it to the town council, who has control of the money and the means to work toward a solution with the developer, and I understand they are.

"Sometimes it seems as if [council] walks up to the cliff, then walks back, then walks back up, then walks back away. One of these days they're going to walk up to that cliff and jump off. – But [which direction] they decide to jump, we don't know yet," Gushee concluded with a metaphorical flourish that no one could top.

However, before Gushee suggested adjournment after stating that all the base factual aspects the meeting had been designed to cover had been exhausted, his fellow town commissioner Sandra Charles seemed to express the hope of all present. Charles called the discussion "exciting" and expressed the hope a joint planning consensus could be achieved that could direct the town and county's elected boards on exactly which way they should finally jump off that decisionmaking cliff.

For one thing is sure - in 20 years this community will not look like it does today. At issue is will it feature a cookie-cutter pattern of one acre or larger

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lots, with individual wells sucking an already troubled groundwater shed dry; or will it feature a clustered "new urbanism" design aimed at localizing the life of

those new communities in an essentially self-supporting, central utility, business and recreationally supplied community? rogerb@warrencountyreport.com





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