

Growth Plan meeting breeds discussion, dialogue

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LA CENTER - Clark County residents engaged in lively yet amicable debate during an informational meeting over the Alternative 4 option to the county's Comprehensive Growth Management Plan Thursday evening at the La Center Grange.

Grange Master Greg Smith opened the meeting with an introduction of the evening's first speaker, County Councilor David Madore, who played a key role in developing Alternative 4 as an option.

Madore gave a brief overview of each alternative and gave a county history lesson explaining why and how the choices were developed. He criticized a 1994 zoning layout, saying it failed to match the development patterns already occurring throughout the county. As a result, he said landowners lost investment opportunities as re-zoning and down-zoning changed the scope of how they could use their property.

In the decades since that plan was approved, lawsuits have been waged, appeals have been made, and now, more than 20 years later, voters will decide how to move the county forward.

In the meeting, Madore and representatives of Clark County Citizens United and Friends of Clark County focused on Alternative 1 and Alternative 4. Alternative 1, sometimes called the "do nothing" choice, would move the county along the track laid out 20 years ago with corrective updates made along the way. Alternative 4 would enact changes that critics warn would harm the county, but proponents laud as a restoration of landowners' property rights.

"We worked with staff in order to make sure that we pay attention to the rural citizens," Madore said. "The basics of it is that Alt 4 ... aligns our zoning map with reality.

"We cleaned the map, we painted it white, and then we told the map, 'tell us what's there,'" Madore said.

Alternative 4's critics say it would deregulate too much land, opening it up to development and urban sprawl which would overload county infrastructure, destroy the county's rural character, and potentially pollute the water supply.

Susan Rasmussen and Carol Levanen of Clark County Citizens United, a 501 c(4) nonprofit formed



Community Input

TREE FARMER RICK Dunning explains his concerns about Clark County zoning rules to county officials and local leaders Thursday evening at the La Center Grange.



in the wake of the 1994 plan, argued that Alternative 4 would restore options to landowners “stolen” from them when county representatives refused to listen to rural residents’ input while developing the plan.

The extra development will be necessary, Levanen told the gathering, to provide the necessary housing for Clark County’s growing population in the years ahead. Alternative 4 would open about 12,000 new lots to development, which is about 5,000 more than Alternative 1.

“Where are your children going to go?” she asked the crowd. “Where are your grandchildren going to go? ... If we adopt the no-action plan, or even plan number 2, that’s not going to be adequate for the population that’s going to come to Clark County and a lot of that is going to be your children and grandchildren.”

David McDonald, speaking for Friends of Clark County, disputed Levanen’s assertion that more development would be needed to house a growing Clark County population. He pointed out that the recently released draft supplemental environmental impact statement on the alternatives predicts Clark County’s growth will be handled by the current plan.

“We’ve picked that number so we can plan for it that,” he said. “We’ve discovered that the entire population that we’re planning for can be accommodated with the development as we have it set up today, both in the urban growth area and rural areas.”

He called references to Alternative 1 as the “do-nothing” plan misleading.

“I call it the ‘we’ve done our work already’ alternative,” McDonald said. “I think Alternative 1 is a fine option because it does what we’re supposed to do and it makes us compliant with the (Growth Management) Act.”

Rasmussen brought up a separate problem some county residents had with the zoning regulations governing their property.

“The 1994 plan disregarded the rural character that was on the ground. And that rural character was created as a consequence of rural practices of one family, generation after generation, parceling (their land) off – ‘here’s one for our daughter,’ ‘here’s one for our son,’ ‘one for our granddaughter’ – that practice was obliterated in the 1994 plan.”

Her words prompted Rick Dunning, who owns a tree farm in Clark County, to speak up about his own frustrations with the zoning regulations.

“I want one of my boys to be able to build on the corner of my tree farm, because I’m getting tired. I want him to take over,” Dunning told McDonald.

Under current regulations governing Dunning’s farm, the only way for him to make that possible is to cut away an entire 20-acre chunk of the family farm.

“I wouldn’t mind 5 acres,” he said to McDonald. “But when you sell a piece of property to your son, you give him a title to that land. He has to own it. If something happens in his life it’s going to be out of there. It’s not going to be a part of the farm anymore.”

Dunning asked the speakers to try to see each other’s point of view. He understands a need to preserve rural and resource lands, he said, but it must be balanced against property owners’ rights.

State Representative Liz Pike (R-Camas) spoke in favor of Alternative 4, saying the thousands of 2.5- and 5-acre lots it would make available could serve as an affordable starting-place for a small family farm. Her own family operates a farm on her property, she said, where they farm fruits and vegetables, raise organic turkeys, and gather free-range eggs.

“About half of the food we consume comes from our own farm,” Pike said. “You can grow massive quantities of food on really small acreage.”

Some attendees were skeptical the lots would be used that way.

“I would be surprised if one tenth of (those) people who buy these parcels are actually going to farm them,” one woman in the crowd said. “But people really like to have their country estates.”

Steve Boynton, who owns La Center Farms, has lived in the area for about 20 years. He and his family moved to Clark County from Oregon, where he worked in environmental services. He told the crowd how his childhood home outside of San Francisco devolved into urban sprawl.

“All the farms were gone, they ended up turning into cities,” Boynton said. “You go into the same area, you’ve got 100 miles of city, slums, all of that stuff. I’d hate to see it come to this place.”

Boynton saw those events echo around him when he worked in Oregon, he said, and now he warns the same thing could happen in Clark County.

“I hear the same stories about ‘Oh, I want to give it to my child.’ Then you find out they’re selling it to developers ... I’ve seen it in California, I’ve seen it in Oregon, I’m seeing it here,” Boynton said. “If you do this, I think the people who live here now are going to end up losing it.”

Overall, the meeting was calm, if emotional. No voices were raised to inappropriate levels; speakers only rarely interrupted one another. If no minds were changed, at least proponents of the plans had the chance to make their cases clearly known.

“Regardless of our own individual feelings about our own land, these people were dramatically put upon in 2004,” Levanen said. “For the most part, 90 percent of their parcels are nonconforming. Ninety percent of our population in rural Clark County lost their development rights. Lost their options. Lost the ability for their children to live on their property. Lost that ability for their grandchildren. And they lost their desire to take care of the land. We want that to return to these people.”

McDonald stood by his position. He acknowledged the limitations regulations place on landowners, but pointed out that zoning laws, by their nature, restrict property rights in cities and in the rural areas.

“If somebody carves off a 5-acre piece ... somebody else makes a choice on it,” McDonald said to Rick Dunning in particular. “I know you want to give it to your boy, and I know he wants to stay there, but the reality is that may not always happen. And 100 years from now, when you and I are long gone, we don’t know what’s going to happen to that parcel. Not everybody gets to have what they want with their property.”