

Rural landowners push for alternative

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Editor | Posted: Wednesday, March 25, 2015 12:00 am

County open houses for growth plan study

Public urged to attend, participate

Wed., March 25, 5:30-7 p.m., Ridgefield High School, 2724 S. Hillhurst Rd., Ridgefield
Wed., April 1, 5:30-7 p.m., Hockinson High School, 16819 NE 159th St., Brush Prairie

Clark County's 2016 Comprehensive Plan web pages have been updated with information about the 4th Alternative. The six new maps that have been posted can be viewed at:



CP16#0581



Growth plan study

CLARK COUNTY OFFICIALS have scheduled two open houses to discuss four alternatives under consideration to update the local Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. The open houses are scheduled for Wed., March 25 at Ridgefield High School and Wed., April 1 at Hockinson High School. Both events are scheduled for 5:30-7 p.m.

<http://www.clark.wa.gov/planning/2016update/alternatives.html>

Further details on the information included in the 4th alternative are available on the BOCC Grid page. See the presentation at <http://www.clark.wa.gov/thegrid/>

Twenty years of frustration for Clark County rural landowners has finally arrived at a critical juncture.

County officials have scheduled two open houses to discuss four alternatives under consideration to update the local Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. The open houses are scheduled for Wed., March 25 at Ridgefield High School and Wed., April 1 at Hockinson High School. Both events are scheduled for 5:30-7 p.m.

“The public has to know that this is their opportunity to weigh in,” said Susan Rasmussen, a La Center resident and member of Clark County Citizens United (CCCU), a nonprofit group formed in 1994 to promote reasonable and appropriate land use planning in the area. “Their comments are valuable in this process.”

Area residents like Rasmussen have devoted decades of energy and resources to try to change what they consider to be Clark County's flawed Comprehensive Growth Management Plan, adopted in 1994.

"Our county has far more restrictive zoning than any other county in the state," said Amboy resident Jim Malinowski, a member of CCCU and also a Clark Public Utilities commissioner. "I'm very frustrated by our lack of rural property rights."

Three alternatives to the plan were approved for environmental review in the fall of 2014. Those included making no change (Alternative 1), making changes to long-range planning for some rural and urban areas (Alternative 2), and urban growth boundary changes for smaller cities (Alternative 3). Battle Ground, Ridgefield and La Center have all applied to add land to their borders.

Unhappy with the three alternatives and their lack of input, citizens such as Rasmussen and Malinowski pushed for another alternative. On March 11, Councilor David Madore presented Alternative 4 at a workshop. Madore said the alternative would identify 1,500 existing parcels that were rezoned to resource lands in 1994. If Alternative 4 is adopted, it would place those parcels that are currently not in compliance back into compliance.

"Every seven years, we make necessary changes to ensure that our citizens have ample, affordable and useful land for our community to grow, prosper, and thrive for the next 20 years," Madore said on his Facebook page after the March 11 workshop. "Today was a milestone for rural citizens as we moved their options forward in our Comprehensive Plan Update.

"Every city in our county joined us for an important work session to consider their plans in Alternative 3 and the corrections to rural zoning in Alternative 4," Madore said. "Since 1994, the county locked thousands of Rural, Agriculture, and Forest parcels into very large zones that made more than 80 percent of rural parcels 'nonconforming.'

"This Comp Plan was about to lock in that unrealistic zoning map mismatch for another seven years until we paused the process last month to fix it," Madore said. "Other counties in our state provide more manageable zoning sizes and more flexible options. Clark County too, can do better."

Properties are banks for owners

Many rural landowners use their property as an investment, or retirement plan. Not having the ability to divide or develop their land can prevent them from realizing any profit from their years of ownership. Also, many rural landowners would like to develop their land to establish homesites for family members, also made difficult by restrictions created by the Comprehensive Growth Management Plan.

"Many of the rural and resource lands have not been updated since the original 1994 plan was written," Rasmussen said. "This plan initiated the massive downzoning of thousands of acres of land. Rural property owners that at one time were zoned 2.5 acres, are now zoned Ag-20, F-40, and even F-80. An economic analysis of the downzoning that was imposed on the landowners, that was created as a result of the poorly written '94 plan, has never been done in the original EIS, or subsequent updates. You could say that Clark County rural communities experienced the first great recession in 1994.

“These properties are also banks for many rural citizens,” Rasmussen said. “These properties represent retirement funds, IRA’s, college tuition, rainy-day emergency funds. This is an element of rural culture that helps to define Clark County’s rural character. Rural character is important in GMA (the Growth Management Act). Rural character is defined as the patterns of rural land development and parcelizations that have occurred as a natural result of rural cultural practices that have endured over generations.

“Now, most of the rural and resource lands have been frozen in time since 1994,” Rasmussen said. “That comprehensive plan was written with an exclusionary attitude. The rural communities have never been given a voice at the table during the planning work sessions. This community has been underrepresented. As a result, the rural lands, and the problems arising from the 1994 plan, have been continually ignored.

“These lands have been ignored for 20 years,” Rasmussen added. “The style of farming has drastically changed. We have vibrant 4-H, and equestrian communities. We have avid gardeners, active retirees, and multi-generations living together. All require 1-, 2.5- and 5-acre parcels. Rural lands deserve better attention.”

Madore said the Alternative 4 proposal was “designed to restore more flexible options for rural lots that were rezoned in 1994. The proposal corrects the problem of the county designating over 1,500 parcels smaller than 9.5 acres, as legally nonconforming, affecting 6,537 acres. It also proposes to allow smaller rural parcel sizes in areas bounded by adjacent smaller parcel sizes.”

Citizens push for Alternative 4

Citizens like Rasmussen and Malinowski are urging other area residents to attend the open houses in support of Alternative 4.

“The planners have been ignoring our comments all along,” Rasmussen said. “CCCU has been saying that nobody is at the table representing the interests and future designs for the rural landowners. The local jurisdictions have been designing our futures according to their needs and desires. This policy is obsolete and just wrong.

“The process has never had an inclusive policy with the rural citizens until January,” Rasmussen said. “Clark County is required to complete its next review and update of the comprehensive plan, development regulations (zoning, critical areas ordinances, etc.) and urban areas by June 30, 2016. We are planning out for the next 20 years. Most of the rural and resource lands have never been updated since 1994. This update should have been a massive undertaking with a solid review of all rural lands.”

Rasmussen said 64 percent of the county’s population base lives in the unincorporated areas of Clark County. She also pointed out that the rural landowners have “opened up their checkbooks and donated over \$260,000 to accomplish this great effort.” Among their victories in court was a landmark decision known as the “Poyfair Remand,” which came in the Superior Court of Washington on April 4, 1997.

Yacolt resident Carol Levanen said CCCU “won in the courts in numerous topics and the county was to make corrections according to those court orders. They never did that. Instead, the commissioners kept promising CCCU, from 1996 to 2012 that they were still working on the rural lands corrections and they just needed time. In the meantime, in 2006, the GMHB (Growth Management Hearings Board) closed the case for no action from both parties.

“The whole thing was a sham,” Levanen said. “We are now telling this board (county councilors) that CCCU expects this county to comply with the court orders that CCCU won in the courts. Even now, they have not complied with GMA public participation or SEPA requirements. It is the same staff and it is the same sham.”

The Clark County Board of Councilors will hold a public hearing at 10 a.m., Tue., April 14 at the Public Service Center, 1300 Franklin St., in Vancouver.

Find more information at www.clark.wa.gov/planning/2016update/alternatives.html.