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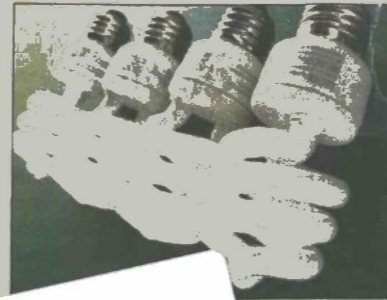
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Planning Commission recommendation snubs Alternative 4

Commissioner cites short study, long consequences in making decision

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staff reporter

The Clark County Planning Commission's recommendation for a preferred alternative to the county's comprehensive growth management plan did not include any provision from controversial Alternative 4, county documents show.

Officials are choosing from a menu of four different proposed alternatives to the plan. Alternative 1, the "do nothing" choice, would leave the county on the track laid out for it in the 1994

growth management plan, which critics have labeled an assault on rural landowners' property rights.

Alternatives 2 and 4 were crafted with the intent of restoring those rights to landowners but citizens and environmentalists worry it would open too much to development, causing urban sprawl which would overload county infrastructure and destroy the area's rural character. Alternative 3 is a package of small changes proposed by city governments for special projects and adjustments.

The commission's recommendation was based in Alternative 1 with a few pieces of Alternatives 2 and 3 added in. Alternative 4 in particular has amassed a passionate backing so, with public comment nearly evenly split for and

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Alternative 4

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against it, the absence from the commission's recommendation is conspicuous.

To come up with the specifics of the recommendation, the planning commission examined each proposed alternative and voted on each provision separately. For example, the vote to recommend Alternative 1 was unanimous while an Alternative 4 provision to reduce lot sizes in forest zones failed with just two votes in favor

and four opposed. Each provision that survived its vote was then forwarded to the Clark County Board of Councilors as part of the recommendation, but no provision from Alternative 4 made it through.

Planning Commission member Karl Johnson, who refers to himself as a conservative and a "property rights guy," blamed a flawed and rushed approval process for Alternative 4's exclusion, despite the support it has gained.

"Ideology does not rule in the planning commission," said Johnson, a La Center resident. "Common sense does. It would

be irresponsible for us to take Alternative 2 or Alternative 4 as a whole ... based on the lack of information available."

Johnson, like many others, worries the 12,000 newly created lots proposed in Alternative 4 could lead to a development explosion that would overwhelm the county's roads and pollute or deplete its water supply.

"If you just talked about water and septic alone up there, that's a monster," Johnson said Friday. "We don't have the money, even close, to handle that. Do you want 12,000 new lots in the

next 20 years and no money to fix the infrastructure?"

Though he believes the concerns which spawned Alternatives 2 and 4 have merit, he said the proposals should have been subjected to more scrutiny before adoption so their consequences could be better understood and controlled.

"It's not as simple as a choice between one, two, three, or four," he said. "This is off-the-wall. This is too fast."

Support and opposition to the controversial alternatives varies wildly. Some landowners are excited by the idea of parceling out

their land to sell for development while others are worried that housing in the area could jeopardize their agricultural operations. Still others worry that new water wells needed to support development could run existing water reserves dry.

Though his priority lies in protecting landowners' property rights, Johnson said all-out deregulation would be unrealistic.

"Should I be able to put a nuclear power plant on my five acres?" he asked. "Of course not."

But the answer from the other side of the aisle is also wrong, he said.

"You can't touch any property ever? Keep it rural? Let the people from the city look at it and feel good about themselves? No. It's not their property," Johnson said.

To find the answer, he said, policy should balance personal property with responsible growth and a reasonable expectation of what a rural property should look like. He agreed with Alternative 4 supporters that the 1994 growth management plan unfairly harmed local landowners and said a remedy should be found — possibly by working with the proposals set forth in Alternatives 2 and 4 — but the potential harm caused by reckless development should not be overlooked.

Though the commission made its recommendation, the Councilors who will make the final decision on how to proceed are under no obligation to heed it. At this point, Johnson supports proposals by board chair candidate Mark Boldt and District 2 candidate Chuck Green to postpone the Board's final decision until January when it can be examined by the complete 5-person council.

"The whole thing comes back to 'what is the right decision here?'" Johnson said. "You know what the right decision is? Alternative 1; because we don't need to do anything until we seat five councilors."