



Times-News

Planning a community without losing the community

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David Weintraub
ECO NOTES



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All around the country residents of communities large and small are complaining about haphazard development, ugly sprawl and the loss of a “sense of community” that makes the place they live special. Some blame it on developers, others on out-of-towners coming in to buy our land. In truth, unless the rules are strong enough to prevent development from becoming a “race for the bottom” on how land is used, and unless municipal planning departments encourage a respect for the land, the result is cookie cutter development that turns unique places into Anytown, USA. Many of us came from Anytown and we weren’t pleased with the results. The question is how do we protect Henderson County from making the same mistakes that the other 10,000 “Anytowns” on the map have made? The heart of the matter is in the PLANNING.

Henderson County now has a comprehensive zoning code for the first time. For twenty years many have labored long and hard to establish a set of rules that would guide development and balance it with environmental protection. Unfortunately, the code does little more than determine the quantity of homes per acre. Does it protect our rural character? Does it limit pollution to our waterways? Does it guard against sprawl, protect our natural and manmade landmarks or maintain our hardwood forests? On all counts, the answer is NO.

In fact, the likelihood is that it will do the opposite. By planning through zoning alone, we actually encourage sprawl. This tends to result in the loss of open space, the loss of rural landscapes and most devastating of all, the fragmenting of wildlife habitats and the disappearance of farmland and forests.

I know what you’re going to say, “What gives, Weintraub?” You’ve been jumping up and down screaming for the Land Development Code (LDC) for how long, and now that we have one, you’re turning around and saying it’s bad? The LDC is not bad on the surface, it does control some level of growth. But it is nothing more than a first step and without more, it could become a planning kudzu that causes serious damage in the long run.

So what do we need? We need to develop plans for the county that encourages development that protects open space even if lot sizes aren’t huge. In poll after poll and ballot after ballot nationwide, citizens say that they value walkable communities that maintain their rural charm rather than large lots which encourage traffic jams, superhighways and price the natives out of town. In essence, we need to develop planning protocols that value clean air and water, large tracts of open space, and protects farmland, thereby providing a wide spectrum of benefits to people and wildlife.

Our current LDC provides some development incentives by offering density credits for open space preservation, but it needs to be strengthened. We need to give greater incentives to developers that protect open space and dis-incentives to developers that continue to promote the old style sprawl-inducing development. And we need commissioners who understand that protecting open space is not enough if the outcome results in fragmenting wildlife to the point of destroying the very habitats we are seeking to preserve.

Many of the planning decisions in the last few decades that have protected rural space nationwide have come not from planning departments, government officials or “experts,” but from local residents who had a stake in their communities and didn’t want to see their ridgetops covered over, and their green spaces turned to gray.

The work on the Thomas property is a perfect example. A fragile ecosystem consisting of a major birding habitat, wetlands and floodplains could be the perfect canvas to create a rural development that protects ecosystems and offers residents scenic views or it could have resulted in major damage to nature and peril to future residents. When the community stood up and said we can do better, the developer responded to community concerns and city council, and the planning board responded in kind.

ECO’s newly formed Green Infrastructure Committee is a regionwide forum available to you to help us work together to find solutions to the major challenges facing our area today. We are looking for volunteers willing to work with the small area planning process that the county has begun in several communities, we are looking for people interested in helping research and draft white papers on the consequences of steep slope and flood plain development as well as the necessity of having more effective local controls over storm water runoff and more. And, we need volunteers to work with ECO to become monitors of local government hearings, of construction sites and to work with local residents who are in need of assistance on how to resolve environmental issues in their neighborhood.

- To launch this work, ECO is sponsoring our first Green Infrastructure forum on Wednesday, February 27 at 7:00 PM at the Hendersonville Public Library titled, “Everything You Know About Planning is Wrong” featuring city planner, Larry Collins, who will present a provocative discussion on why a growing number of towns and small cities are moving away from the kind of zoning codes that Henderson County has just adopted and how a town can maintain its rural character, protect its natural heritage, yet still be profitable for developers. For more information about this and other ECO programs contact us at (828) 692-0385 or log on at www.eco-wnc.org.

Editor's Note: ECO Notes is provided by the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a nonprofit organization dedicated to clean air, clean water, recreation, and the conservation and preservation of the natural heritage and resources of the mountain region. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or on-line at www.eco-wnc.org.