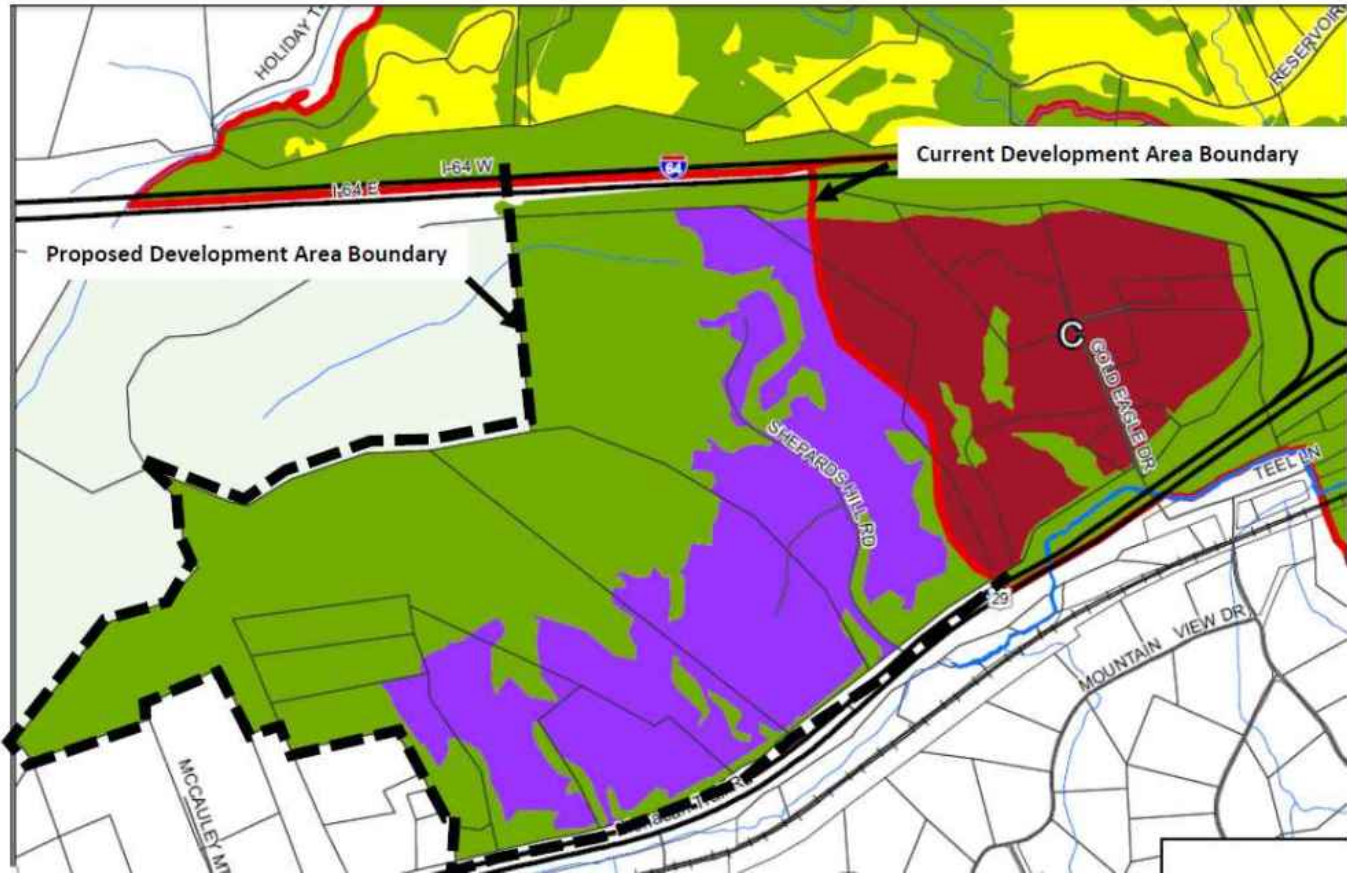


Supervisors briefed on growth area adjustment ahead of public hearing
written by Newspack Team | September 3, 2015



The chairwoman of the Albemarle Board of Supervisors has asked county staff to better explain the reasons they are considering adjusting the growth area boundary to add land for either a brewery or some other industrial use that would become a job center.

“We need to get a couple of misconceptions out of the way that are tripping people up,” said Jane Dittmar during a work session on the proposed adjustment of the growth area to add up to 223 acres owned by an Atlanta-based company called Sweetspot of Albemarle.

In May, the board voted unanimously to direct staff to study land southwest of the intersection of U.S. 29 and Interstate 64 to see if it is suitable for light industrial uses.

“It’s not a project-specific request,” said Elaine Echols, the county’s principal planner. “We did not look at this area as being for any particular industry because prospects come and go.”

However, it was revealed in July that a “beverage company” is interested in the property.

The company has not been publicly identified by the county, but Oregon’s Deschutes Brewery has confirmed to Charlottesville Tomorrow that it is looking at Albemarle County as one of three locations for an east coast brewing and distribution facility.

Representatives with the company would neither confirm nor deny that they are looking at this specific location.

The county planning commission voted 7-0 in August to recommend denial of the request to adjust the growth area boundary in part because of lack of information about the eventual use. They also had concerns about the process, the proximity of the location to the interstate interchange and the eventual costs that could be paid by county taxpayers to entice the prospect to choose Albemarle.

Dittmar said the planning commission and some members of the public are confused about the process.

"I can't blame anyone for being confused about this," Dittmar said. "If you haven't had planning classes and you're not a planner, you kind of smoosh it all together."

Dittmar said the only question before the board next week is whether the land should ultimately be used for industrial use or not.

"That's the only question," Dittmar said. "Then we move on to a lot of detail as we move through these other processes."

A unique situation

"We have a unique situation and a unique opportunity at this interchange with two primary roadways," said Faith McClintic, the county's new economic development director. "It's a great location with respect to some of downtown and some of our local assets."

Those include the future 340-acre Hedgerow Park which is to the west of the property. Additionally, an 82-acre section of the property is already within the jurisdictional area of the Albemarle County Service Authority, one less obstacle to it being developed.

One comment by the planning commission was to at least consider only the developable portions of the land rather than the full request for all 223 acres.

McClintic said there have been many conversations between staff and representatives of Sweetspot. However the county, and not Sweetspot, is the applicant for the boundary adjustment.

"Their preference is for all of the parcels to be included in the boundary adjustment but if the board were willing to consider a couple of the larger parcels that currently have [residential] zoning, they would be certainly willing to have some support for that as well," McClintic said.

McClintic said Sweetspot representatives are concerned about having some of the land designated as green space in the Comprehensive Plan.

"They are very concerned about that being designated in that fashion before there has been an opportunity for any detailed level of site evaluation," McClintic said.

However, no one from Sweetspot or representing the beverage company spoke at Wednesday's work session, nor have they spoken at any of the public meetings to date.

Echols said detailed questions about the future land use would be answered during a rezoning, which would be necessary to convert the land from residential to some other use.

The project could also open up further development of land to the east of the Sweetspot property. Over ten vacant acres owned by the Pines Group is already zoned for highway commercial development, as is

the land occupied by the Virginia Eagle Distribution Company.

McClintic said the beverage company is still considering some of those lands as well.

"It is still an option for them," McClintic said.

Echols said the Virginia Department of Transportation will not allow the land to be developed until better road access can be identified and built. That could involve an enhanced entrance at Shepherds Hill Road, which is the main travel way into the Sweetspot land.

"Gold Eagle Drive is too close to the interchange," Echols said. "But I'm getting ahead of myself because we don't know what the plan needs to be."

Supervisor Palmer raises questions

The only critical questions about the boundary adjustment came from Supervisor Liz Palmer, who represents the Samuel Miller District in which the land is located.

Palmer asked McClintic to comment on a Sept. 2 report from the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce that indicated that jobs in the region increased by 12 percent from 2004 to 2014. That includes the city, Albemarle and outlying counties.

McClintic said she had not read the report carefully, but that didn't preclude the need to secure more land for light industrial land.

"I certainly was pleased to see that we have an uptick and I think in a lot of areas we are beginning to see a similar trend but it does depend on the sectors and that's very important for us to monitor," McClintic said.

Several supervisors said that many of the objections from the public and the planning commission seem to come from information that would not need to be divulged until the rezoning.

"People are really getting ahead of themselves," said Supervisor Ken Boyd. "All of the questions I'm getting from the public are things and issues that are generally done at the rezoning. These are questions that are not being answered today that we don't really need to answer today for the comp plan amendment."

Palmer argued that people did realize how the process works and that the boundary adjustment is the first step towards the eventual development they are concerned about.

"It's bound to be something different and if an applicant comes forward with a comp plan amendment with the rezoning amendment, then we are in a better negotiating spot," Palmer said. She said many people just wanted assurances that natural resources would be protected at the boundary adjustment level.

Supervisor Ann Mallek said the cost of bringing a combined application would be "overwhelming."

"We will require all of that detail at the rezoning level that it seems to me to unreasonable to expect it today," Mallek said.

Dittmar said she wants staff to produce several documents before the Sept. 9 public hearing.

One is whether the adjustment would conflict with the Comprehensive Plan's traditional division of 95 percent of county land being designated as rural. Another is on the amount of light industrial land available.

"I want [staff] to put in writing that we do not have sufficient [light industrial land] to be able to generate economic development," Dittmar said. "Don't be lengthy, because it has to be able to go into an email."

"I want to assure people that whether they agree with me or not, whichever way I vote, that we did have a good, transparent and honest approach to this thing," she added.