

Less is more in Albemarle's rural countryside
written by Newspark Team | August 14, 2014



Albemarle County's rural farms, fields and forests are getting special attention from the Board of Supervisors as it continues a detailed review of proposed changes to the Comprehensive Plan.

The result is an important course correction in the view of some board members. They say the draft plan encouraged too much commercialization of the rural countryside for uses like restaurants, lodging, events and even new golf courses.

At several work sessions over the past two months, the board has directed staff to keep the focus on agriculture, forestry and natural resource protection.

"I feel that ... some of the [proposed] changes really emphasize new uses rather than our traditional preferred uses," said Supervisor Liz Palmer at a work session last week. Palmer called for a return to language found in previous planning documents.

Since 1980, Albemarle's Comprehensive Plans have sought to encourage new development in urban growth areas comprising 5 percent of the county's land area. In the remaining 95 percent of the county which is rural, zoning specifies minimum lot sizes and restricts commercial development.

However, county officials said that there are already 18,451 dwellings in the rural area, and existing zoning could allow for creation of another 45,000 hypothetical building lots.

One advocate for rural-area protection said that the draft plan shifted the emphasis in the wrong

direction.

“Albemarle’s policies have long reflected rural preservation as a priority,” said Jeff Werner, who was representing the Piedmont Environmental Council. “One reason is that dispersed rural development is not sustainable. ... It is critical that this remain a cornerstone of the county policy.”

However, staff responded that the draft maintained a consistent vision for the rural areas, one that’s been in place for more than 30 years.

“We are really not seeing this plan change anything philosophically regarding the rural areas,” said Wayne Cilimberg, Albemarle’s director of planning and community development. He also said “the devil is in the details” of the Planning Commission’s recommendations.

For example, staff said the changes included additional options for restaurants, lodging, events and some recreational activities.

Palmer outlined numerous concerns about the effect of those proposals.

“As somebody who has now read the current plan and the draft, I find them quite different,” Palmer said. “I find the emphasis on commercialization significant. When you are emphasizing these new uses, then you [are] putting forth a philosophy.”

On Wednesday, supervisors directed staff to modify the Comprehensive Plan in a number of areas, placing greater emphasis on agriculture, forestry and natural resource protection and thus backing away from the Planning Commission’s suggestions to consider additional commercial activities.

Lodging, restaurants and events

With respect to additional options for lodging, the board easily reached consensus that it did not want to expand that activity.

“We allow people to have 10 rooms on their property now,” Palmer said referring to the zoning for a bed and breakfast. “If we start having more than 10 rooms on a property, there will be more demands on police and fire/rescue that we don’t have the resources for right now.”

On restaurants, Albemarle’s principal planner Elaine Echols said the Planning Commission concluded there should not be new destination eateries in the rural area. She noted that Duners in Ivy is the only independent restaurant in all of Albemarle’s rural area.

Supervisors agreed and expressed support for allowing restaurant and food service operations only within existing structures, particularly historic buildings in specific crossroads communities such as Batesville.

The Board also discussed the growth in tourism related to farm wineries and associated events such as weddings.

“In 2005, we really emphasized the importance of authentic rural Albemarle for tourists,” Echols said. “You can come and look but don’t expect there will be facilities for you there. Now we recognize the economic importance of tourism and how we can better support the visitor experience.”

Recent changes in state law allow special events by-right at farm wineries and farm breweries. Albemarle's rules allow for those events to be attended by up to 200 people. Special use permits allow events for up to 150 people on other rural area properties.

However, a proposal to allow regular commercial events at an individual residence without the requirement of a special-use permit failed to get support.

No more golf

The list of other rural area recreational activities in the revised Comprehensive Plan is unlikely to include support for new swim clubs, tennis clubs or golf courses. Golf was specifically identified as an area of concern.

When the Trump Winery proposed a new golf course last year it came under scrutiny related to conservation easements which put limits on the land's commercial activity. However, had the proposal gone forward, it also would have needed a special use permit from the county. Four supervisors said Wednesday they wanted golf removed as a potential use.

"I'm taking exception to that," Supervisor Kenneth C. Boyd said. "I don't think it's our place in government to say we already have enough of this so we shouldn't consider adding any more."

Boyd was joined by Supervisor Brad Sheffield in opposition to the listing of specific activities. They prefer a focus on evaluating the impacts of all outdoor recreational uses on a case-by-case basis.

The board majority prevailed and the Comprehensive Plan will call for updated zoning regulations that would eliminate consideration of new swimming, tennis and golf clubs. That change would come about through a separate update process known as a zoning text amendment after the plan is approved.

Albemarle began the process to update the Comprehensive Plan in 2011 and originally expected adoption of the new plan to occur in early 2013.

Supervisors will continue their chapter-by-chapter review of the draft Comprehensive Plan through the end of the year. A final plan is now expected to be brought to a public hearing and to be adopted early next year.