

Business, environmental groups in harmony on rural economy
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Albemarle County's

Planning Commission

work session on rural economic development saw business and environmental groups in a state of mutual interest.

The Tuesday meeting was part of a process of marrying the rural preservation goals in the county's

Comprehensive Plan

with its

2010 Economic Vitality Action Plan

.

Planning commissioners, activists, members of the public and county staff all agreed that allowing landowners more choices in the economic use of their property provides incentives for rural land preservation.

Representatives of the

Piedmont Environmental Council

and the

Free Enterprise Forum

were in attendance, with their common cause made all the more surprising by their ongoing battle over the

Western Bypass

.

"What I've heard throughout this discussion for the past year or so ... is a strongly held, shared belief in the value of rural areas," said Lee Catlin, assistant to the county executive for community and business partnerships. "You have the possibility of solutions that everyone can buy into."

The conversation centered around reducing the restrictions on use of existing buildings, allowing “inns” larger than the current limit of five bedrooms, and whether to allow limited food service at breweries and wineries.

County regulations limit the use of existing buildings except for special cases such as if the building was employed the same way historically. Neil Williamson, president of the Free Enterprise Forum, presented a slideshow during public comment that showed numerous rural businesses from nearby counties that are housed in repurposed buildings, all of which he said were quite successful.

“All of these examples, based on my review, would not be permitted in Albemarle’s current rural area. Why?” Williamson asked. He then identified two Albemarle structures that could be used in ways other than their historical function, asking, “What’s the difference in impact?”

The commissioners seemed to agree that the historical status and use of a building was an arbitrary standard, and that inns and restaurants should be allowed in existing buildings regardless of historical use. Commissioner

Don Franco

suggested a new standard: whether a proposed use would have more impact and infrastructure demand than the landowner’s by-right option of subdividing the property for housing.

“I’m open to reuse of existing structures whether they’re historic or not,” said Franco, offering as an example, “Renting out [as a bed and breakfast] a house that already exists — I can’t see that it’s going to have any more impacts to the community than if somebody actually lived there.”

While environmental advocates said they recognized that added economic vitality might allow some landowners to preserve their land’s rural character, they urged that the conversation begin by recognizing the intrinsic value of natural spaces.

“The lack of commercial value attached to ecosystem services and the ecosystems that generate them can easily lead some to propose that their sacrifice at the altar of development be allowed,” said Tom Olivier, chairman of the

Piedmont Group of the Sierra Club

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However, the Piedmont Environmental Council’s Jeff Werner stated that as long as there were “assurances” that revised regulations would protect rural lands as intended, the new rules could be a boon to landowners and the environment.

“The time is right for this sort of an economic master plan for the rural area,” Werner told the Planning Commission. “You guys need to grab this one and run with it because some good things can happen.”

Water and sewer impacts emerged as a concern of many commissioners, as rural areas typically cannot access public infrastructure. Commissioner

Linda Porterfield

said that the board should aim to keep the approval process “site-specific” based on parcel size and other factors.

Commissioner

Mac Lafferty

said that the commission would then have to be careful to not risk running afoul of some of the economic vitality plan’s other objectives, such as regulatory simplicity.

“I think you’re going to have to take into account scale [of the property] every time and ... my concern is that then these become very individualistic decisions and the applicant may find ... the process being too complicated,” Lafferty said.

Catlin said of the work session that while she was pleased with the areas of mutual agreement, no one should consider the process of reviewing economic vitality to be finished.

“I don’t want to paint it like it’s too rosy at this point,” she said. “There’s still some hard work to do. [The] devil’s in the details.”