

Albemarle Supervisors delay vote on growth area adjustment
written by Newspack Team | September 10, 2015



A majority of the Albemarle Board of Supervisors indicated Wednesday they will support adjusting the county's growth area boundary to add more industrial land, but deferred a vote because they want to see an option for less land than had been recommended by staff.

In May, supervisors directed staff and the county planning commission to study whether 223 acres of land owned by the company Sweetspot of Albemarle near the interchange of U.S. 29 and Interstate 64 would be suitable for industrial development.

Consensus to go forward came after a presentation given earlier in the day by staff who said there could be a projected \$8.8 million shortfall in next year's budget based on current spending trends.

"We saw a five-year financial gap of about \$30 million and that assumes property assessment increases," said Supervisor Diantha McKeel said. "It's very, very concerning."

Faith McClintic, the county's economic development director, said the study was initiated because of a "quality business prospect" that staff has been working with for over a year.

Representatives from Deschutes Brewery of Bend, Oregon, have confirmed with Charlottesville

Tomorrow that Albemarle is one of several locations they are looking for an east coast production facility. However, they have not confirmed they are looking at this property.

McClintic said the study is also an opportunity for the county to begin a conversation about how to increase the amount of light industrial land in the county to help raise commercial tax revenues.

"Based on planning staff's analysis, we have about 256 acres that are designated for industrial uses but not yet zoned," McClintic said. "That certainly leads to some challenges for us and our inventory when we have prospects come looking for a location here."

Near the Interstate 64 interchange, staff recommended designating 138 acres of land for parks and greenspace, and 85 acres as industrial.

"The highlights [of this land] are that it's for particular industries that need a location near an interchange near UVa and downtown Charlottesville," said county planner Elaine Echols said. An 82 acre parcel is currently within the jurisdictional area for water and sewer meaning there would be one less obstacle to development.

County Executive Tom Foley said specific information on incentives that would be made by local and state government could not be shared because of the company's rights to keep negotiations private. However, he said the investment would be worth it.

"We would expect to be able to pay back any investments we would be required to make within three years," Foley said. "Based on property taxes alone, excluding what we might expect from sales taxes and the potential meals tax, we could expect to generate over \$4 million in property tax revenue alone in the first five years."

"After a second phase of build-out proposed by this company we would expect to generate a million dollars per year," he added.

Foley admitted the deal may fall through and the company could choose another location. However, he said another company could come along that would also fit the site, and that those details would also be worked out in a subsequent rezoning.

In August, the Albemarle Planning Commission unanimously recommended against the adjustment because they sought more information on the county's overall inventory of industrial land. They are voiced concerns about impacts to Moores Creek, impacts to wildlife and possible congestion at the interchange.

"They were concerned [about] this expedited process, which is not the right term to be using," Echols said. "It's really more of a compressed time frame."

A total of 44 people spoke at the supervisors' public hearing with just over two-thirds asking the board to vote against the adjustment.

"This just doesn't make sense," said Muriel Grimm. "Albemarle County has a one in three [or more] chance of getting a brewery that has some desirable values. In exchange the county will jeopardize the legal authority of its Comprehensive Plan [and] set a precedent of changing the growth area boundary without explicit criteria for how to do that."

However, several representatives of the business community urged supervisors to move forward.

Hunter Smith, the president of Champion Brewing, urged supervisors to make room for the brewery. His company has manufacturing facilities in both the city and the county.

"As someone who writes these paychecks and employs these people and processes the seven figure revenues that we have, I can attest to the real numbers and the real contribution that this brewery would be making," Smith said.

After the public hearing, supervisors spent over an hour discussing the matter.

Supervisor Liz Palmer said she understood the county needs more industrial land, but said she sided with the Planning Commission.

"To my mind, it's more appropriate to be doing the [comprehensive plan amendment] along with the rezoning and have the applicant [present] so you can deal with all the mitigating factors in that particular area," Palmer said. To date, no representative of the land owner or the prospect has spoken at a public meeting.

Supervisor Diantha McKeel asked staff to address the question about whether the adjustment would set a precedent.

"It will probably encourage other applications to be made and will be a precedent," County Attorney Larry Davis said. "In land use planning, however, just because something is a precedent doesn't mean you have to approve further applications."

At least five supervisors appeared willing to proceed, but they also discussed whether the full 233 acres should be added to the growth area.

McKeel suggested she could support a smaller area and that they could discuss that at a later date.

"We've always said we can't make good decisions after 9:00 p.m.," McKeel said. "But I'd like to talk about maybe limiting that big chunk that we're talking about to something that is narrower."

Palmer said she was more comfortable with the idea of limiting the space to just the 82 acres that are currently zoned for residential and within the water and sewer service area.

Supervisors opted to not make a decision and requested staff return with further information.

"There has been a sense of urgency on this but I think there's no question that the board needs to be thoughtful about the conditions you put on it," Foley said. "We do need to define how much [land] is in this."

McClintic said the prospect is looking at two scenarios for placing their building, including one that straddles land that is already in the development area.

Staff will develop new language for the comprehensive plan amendment and the board may consider it before the next regular meeting on Oct. 7. They will need to prepare new language for the text amendment. No further public hearing will be required unless they consider adding new parcels, which is unlikely.

One supervisor urged caution in how the next amendment language is written.

"I want to be careful that we are in dialog with the landowner when we start putting a whole lot of restrictions on it," said Supervisor Jane Dittmar.