

WASHINGTON COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
January 13, 2025

The Washington County Planning Commission held a public hearing on Monday, January 13, 2025 at 6:00 p.m. at the Washington County Public Safety Training Center, 18350 Public Safety Place Hagerstown, MD. The public hearing was for the purpose of taking public comments on the draft Comprehensive Plan 2040 Update.

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Chairman called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Planning Commission members present were: David Kline, Jeff Semler, Denny Reeder, Terrie Shank, Jay Miller, BJ Goetz, and Ex-officio County Commissioner Randy Wagner. Staff members present were: Washington County Department of Planning & Zoning: Jill, Baker, Director; Jennifer Kinzer, Deputy Director; Travis Allen, Senior Planner; Meghan Jenkins, GIS Coordinator; and Debra Eckard, Office Manager.

Also present at the public hearing were Board of County Commissioners John Barr, Jeff Cline, Wayne Keefer and Derek Harvey and County Administrator Michelle Gordon.

STAFF PRESENTATION

Ms. Baker gave a brief overview of the Comprehensive Plan highlighting key components and goals. She noted that the first 4 chapters provide a brief synopsis of the County and its demographics. Chapters 5 thru 13 provide an analysis of various aspects of growth and development and how each impacts our infrastructure and resources. Elements contained in the Plan include housing, transportation, economic development, infrastructure, land and historic preservation efforts and environmental impacts. Chapter 14 contains the Growth Management and Land Use Plan. This chapter analyzes historic growth patterns and predicts future growth patterns. Estimates are made on future population and housing growth to determine what resources will be needed and what impacts may occur. This chapter also reflects upon the research and analysis completed in the other chapters to determine best management practices for future growth. The culmination of information in the Plan is the Land Use Map. The map provides guidance depicting where various types of development should occur. Chapter 15 is the implementation chapter. Recommendations from each chapter are summarized and prioritized for implementation. These recommendations are broken out by goal and by implementation period.

Ms. Baker explained that the public comment period will close on January 31, 2025. Written comments may be made through the Planning & Zoning website, via e-mail or by regular mail. The Planning Commission will review and deliberate on all comments received through the end of the comment period. Changes may be made to the Plan based upon these deliberations. The Commission will then recommend a final document to the Board of County Commissioners for final approval.

Ms. Baker stated that there seems to be a misunderstanding of the effect the document will or will not have on properties in the County and statements have been made regarding rezoning and its impacts on agricultural operations within the County. Ms. Baker clarified several points of contention as follows:

- This document does not rezone land. Existing zoning and uses will remain intact.
- This document does not change the tax assessment of property.
- This document will not affect the ability of a property owner to conduct agricultural operations on property zoned EC (Environmental Conservation).
- This document does not have regulatory authority to implement stream buffers.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- Thomas Britner, 10228 Governor Lane Boulevard, Williamsport – Mr. Britner spoke on behalf of his family that owns a 200+ acre farm in Williamsport. This property is proposed to be removed from the Urban Growth Area (UGA) and to be designated as Agriculture. Mr. Britner stated that the family is opposed to the removal of the farm from the UGA and its proposed classification. They believe the property should remain in the UGA and be designated as a medium or high density residential area. Mr. Britner's justification for the request is as follows. In 2008, the Britner family entered into a pre-annexation agreement with the City of Hagerstown in which the City agreed to provide water to the Britner Farm in exchange for future annexation into the City. This is a covenant running with the land and is recorded in the Land Records. Also, he believes that properties along Sterling Road can no longer be considered agricultural. Britner Farm is the last property being used for agriculture on Sterling Road, while the remaining properties are industrial

or residential. The construction of a mega warehouse on Sterling Road has had dramatic impact on the character of Sterling Road. Major road improvements have been made on Sterling Road as well as Downsville Pike including the installation of a traffic signal as part of the construction of the warehouse. Mr. Britner noted that the Washington County Public Schools are planning to build a new public school in the area. In summation, Britner Farm is located in an industrial/residential area with access to water and natural gas, easy interstate access and improved roadways.

- Kurt Britner, 16923 Edward Doub Road, Williamsport – Mr. Britner gave a brief history of the Britner Farm. He noted that the family tried to put the Farm into a land preservation program many years ago; however, they were turned down because the farm was within the UGA. At that point, the family started investing in the development of the property and has spent a lot of time and money in that effort.
- Ken Buckler, 20333 Trovinger Mill Road – Mr. Buckler stated that he owns agricultural land along the Antietam Creek which will be directly impacted by changes proposed in the Plan. He believes that the zoning actions of the County increasingly favor wealth and political actions over the community's needs. He cited the development of a solar energy generating system on property owned by Commissioner Barr's family. Despite strong public opposition, this project was approved with a variance for a zero-yard setback without consideration of neighboring property values and agricultural preservation. A similar incident occurred with the approval of the Dollar General in the Rural Village of Cascade which residents opposed. After the developer reclassified the store as a grocery store, the Board of Zoning Appeals approved it due to the lack of a formal definition of a grocery store in the County's Zoning Ordinance. Mr. Buckler believes that the proposed changes in the Comp Plan from Agriculture to Environmental Conservation ultimately may threaten property owners and farmers in the future. It is his belief that the County is laying the groundwork for a massive land grab of creekside property across the County similar to what happened in Frederick County.
- Tim Lung spoke on behalf of the Mayor and Council of the Town of Sharpsburg – Mr. Lung stated that the Town will be submitting written comments during the comment period. He noted that the Town of Sharpsburg is not a growth area and supports the County's efforts to control development in areas around the Town including incompatible Rural Business uses. The Town supports the County's recommendations to tighten the Rural Business zoning district uses due to the conflict created. Mr. Lung believes the term "heritage tourism industries" is ambiguous and needs better clarification so incompatible uses are not encouraged.
- Robert Thomason, 1137 Harpers Ferry Road – Mr. Thomason is in favor of strengthening the environmental concepts and preservation of the natural environment within the County. He believes that stream buffers are very important for the operation of farms and contribute to good farming practices. Mr. Thomason favors protecting the integrity of agricultural activity in the County.
- Chip Wood, 16 Bittersweet Drive – Mr. Wood is an advocate for the proposed Civil War Rail Trail. He noted that the Trail is mentioned in Chapters 7 and 15. In Chapter 15, the recommendation for the creation of the Trail is a long-term goal. Mr. Wood requests that the Trail be changed to a short-term goal. He believes trails benefit tourism, health, and historic education. In Chapter 7, under Economic Development, there are statistics related to major employers in the County; however, he believes that the Visitor's Bureau has been overlooked and should be cited as a major employer for the County with 7% of the workforce in tourism. Mr. Wood stated that the Washington County Coalition based out of Meritus, the Health Department and Brooklane has seen a decline in the overall health of residents in Washington County from 12th to 18th in the State in the last 12 years. He believes that projects that could help improve the health of residents should be given greater priority.
- Shaun Porter – Mr. Porter expressed his opinion that the County is trying to take away land along streams and other scenic areas that can currently be developed with 1 dwelling unit per 5 acres and converting it to 1 dwelling unit per 20 acres. He believes this will restrict who can build in these areas and reserve it only for the wealthy and elite. Mr. Porter's second concern involves two homes in Keedysville who are discharging sewer directly into the Antietam Creek without any type of sewage treatment. The Comprehensive Plan discusses wellhead protection; therefore, these two properties will need to have sewer services extended to them.
- Jim Kercheval, 5 Public Square speaking on behalf of the Greater Hagerstown Committee Task Force – Mr. Kercheval stated that the GHCTC will be submitting written comments during the comment period. He noted that the GHCTC and the County share many goals which include protecting the balance of the urban and rural character of the County, creating and maintaining a land use policy that supports a healthy housing market to provide affordable homes for the workforce and families at different income levels, creating a diverse economy that strengthens the middle class, investing in adequate community infrastructure and encouraging growth in the growth areas where services can be provided efficiently and affordably. The GHCTC is promoting an increase in the density inside of the urban growth areas where services are available and will prevent spillover into the rural areas thereby protecting the character of the County. GHCTC also recommends that once the Plan is approved, the County should immediately hire a consultant experienced in land use planning to prepare a "missing middle and missing workforce housing" study. They encourage the County to collaboratively create a UGA that matches the City's MRGA

boundary after the completion of the City's Water and Wastewater Study that is currently underway. The GHCTC urges more aggressive language within the document encouraging infrastructure investment. Mr. Kercheval noted that permanent easements can be good to protect farmland and the farming industry; however, the County should re-evaluate its permanent easements from time to time to make sure they are where they should be and consider other ways to protect land such as zoning densities.

- Thomas Britner, 10228 Governor Lane Boulevard, speaking on behalf of the Bowman Corporation – Mr. Britner stated that there is concern regarding the amount of land available for mixed use business parks, specifically Tables 13 and 14 in the Plan, which show acreage available per land use. The tables show a massive spike of land designated as industrial and a corresponding decrease in amount of land for industrial flex uses. The Bowman Corporation is opposed to a plan that diminishes mixed use business parks. They believe these types of business parks are in high demand, provide essential services to a lot of small businesses, and are very practical. The Bowman Corporation is also opposed to the reduction of the Urban Growth Area boundary. They believe it is unwise to sacrifice the potential of the future for problems we are facing today. It is understood that retraction of the growth area is due to water capacity issues in the City of Hagerstown; however, in 20 years, infrastructure can be built, capacity issues can be addressed and City policies can change. Bowman Development believes this is a dramatic departure from previous Comprehensive Plans and citizens deserve consistency.

ADJOURNMENT

The Chairman adjourned the public hearing at 6:47 p.m.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

1. February 3, 2025, 6:00 p.m. – Washington County Planning Commission regular meeting

Respectfully submitted,



David Kline, Chairman