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Keep Calvert Country wants citizen input

Group cites problems with county 2040 comprehensive plan update

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Newly formed group Keep Calvert Country hosted a community meeting Thursday night to encourage citizens to provide feedback on Calvert County's first draft of the comprehensive plan, which sets the goals and vision for the future of the county.

The evening meeting in Prince Frederick drew a crowd of 70 citizens to re-

view several areas of concern in the draft, including traffic, sewage and buildout projections, and to hear recommendations from the newly minted bipartisan group.

"We love Calvert's rural character and want to protect Calvert's quality of life. We are not anti-growth, but we want Calvert to grow no faster

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Above left, J.P. Sherkus, president of the Dunkirk Area Concerned Citizens Association, tells the audience, "It's not just sewer. It's infrastructure and something should be in that comprehensive plan that says you don't develop, you don't build, you don't expand, unless infrastructure is there first." Above right, Anthony Williams, president of the Small Business Interest Group, takes great exception with comments concerning negative impacts from residential development in Calvert County during the Keep Calvert Country review of the first draft of the comprehensive plan Nov. 30.



Above left, longtime Calvert County resident and former county planning director Greg Bowen encourages citizens to provide feedback on Calvert County's first draft of the comprehensive plan at the Keep Calvert Country meeting in Prince Frederick on Nov. 30. Above right, Dunkirk resident Frank Grasso, Commissioner Pat Nutter (R), Calvert NAACP President Michael Kent and Calvert Collaborative for Children and Youth President Guffie Smith listen to a review of the draft comprehensive plan.



CITIZENS

than its infrastructure — in other words, to grow responsibly," said former county planning director Greg Bowen.

With current Department of Planning and Zoning members who are currently working on the comprehensive plan in attendance, Bowen kicked off the meeting noting all the positives about Calvert County before gently picking apart the draft plan and making tentative recommendations for improvement.

"It is too much to ask a consultant to both prepare a comprehensive plan and a zoning ordinance in two years," Bowen later said.

Bowen noted the previous planning director omitted traffic from the consulting contract with Parsons Brinckerhoff, the firm facilitating the plan update and zoning ordinance rewrite, and suggested there be no expansion of town centers included in the draft plan until a traffic study is done. Planning Director Mark Willis acknowledged his predecessor left out traffic.

In his presentation, Bowen drew attention to Charles County, which is known for traffic congestion and excessive growth, and informed the audience that chief planning consultant Jackie Seneschal was the Charles County planning director from 1985 to 1994, during its population explosion.

Bowen questioned draft plan statements that "the highway system is presently operating well," which he said understates the problem, and whether the plan expansion of lanes from four to six on Route 2/4 in Prince Frederick will solve the problem. He also noted the plan projections do not match the Board of County Commissioners' projections that indicate traffic will go from 45,000 to 83,600 over the next 13 years.

The draft comp plan also calls for developer-funded sewer expansion outside the town centers into the proposed residential areas and industrial parks.

Keep Calvert Country recommended the county not create new private or developer-funded community sewer systems inside or outside residential areas.

Bowen acknowledged Calvert has the best sewer maintenance system in the state, but questioned if the developer or the county will be responsible for maintenance of the systems once installed and whether taxpayers will have to foot the bill for the expansion.

"The citizen using the system pays for it, not the taxpayer," Willis said, but did acknowledge later the possibility that taxpayer dollars may have been used to shoulder the sewer system when it was \$8 million in the hole and before the system earned sufficient revenue to be user-funded.

A meeting attendee inquired if the county would need to acquire hundreds of acres of land for a new treatment facility to accommodate the town center expansion, and who would pay for the project. Willis said the county would look at capacity to determine if a treatment facility is needed and that the land is needed for dosing fields to get rid of sewage.

"Who pays for it? It goes back to the customers," said Willis, noting state grants could be utilized. "To be honest, that is not to say that taxpayers won't front that money ... commissioners [could] float bond [funding] for 20 years. The customers are paying that bond back."

Regarding growth, population counts for Calvert in 2016 were 91,251, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The residential development, or buildout, provision in the current comprehensive plan, which limits growth to 37,000 dwelling units, has been removed from the draft plan.

"The 37,000 was not a limit; it was an aspirational goal to get it down to," reported long-range planner Jenny Plummer-Welker, explaining the three-prong approach the Board of Commissioners took of down-zoning, providing funds for the purchase of transferable development rights, and providing "incentives

for property owners to voluntarily choose the number of lots they could create."

Bowen said the group recommends keeping current buildout limits.

"The consultant said Calvert cannot grow to more than 100,000, at least through 2040 on the current zoning. However, that's kind of contradicted by the study done by [Maryland Department of Planning] that said looking at the current zoning, the two scenarios — one said there'd be 9,000 households. The other scenario said there could be 15,000 households," reported Bowen.

Bowen said looking at Census Bureau projections of "persons per household" that potentially anywhere between 26,000 and 43,000 new residents could be added to Calvert's population and questioned why would the county want to expand with the current roadways. He noted prior studies that show the aquifer cannot handle that growth. He stressed the county needs to figure out how to address the infrastructure issues to handle growth without increasing taxes.

"It's not just sewer. It's infrastructure and something should be in that comprehensive plan that says you don't develop, you don't build, you don't expand, unless infrastructure is there first," said J.P. Sherkus, president of the Dunkirk Area Concerned Citizens Association.

Dunkirk resident Tom Mero said the plan promotes high-density housing, which is a cost drain on the county with younger families who have more kids that load the school system, and their incomes and property values are lower.

Not everyone agreed with the concerns raised at the meeting, however. "Do you have any idea what we are building? You sitting there criticizing us ... have you seen what we are doing?" questioned Anthony Williams, president of the Small Business Interest Group, taking great exception with Mero's comments.

Williams, who is the developer for a future major subdivision in Prince Frederick, said the coun-



Solomons resident Leonard Zusa questions whether efforts to replace the Gov. Thomas Johnson Bridge is really a priority of elected officials. Zusa was one of 70 people at the Keep Calvert Country meeting to encourage citizens' input on the first draft of the comprehensive plan update Nov. 30 in Prince Frederick.

ty designates traffic studies to developers and that they have to be approved by the Department of Public Works.

Bowen asserted the draft plan weakens existing land preservation programs, despite immense interest in and comments made in support of maintaining the county's rural character at prior comprehensive plan public meetings.

Keep Calvert Country's recommendation is to not restrict the use of TDRs in the Rural Community District unless the county agrees to buy most of them, and to not put in the plan a policy that the first three dwellings in the town centers and the first dwelling unit per acre in a Residential District will not require TDRs.

Willis said his department had been given no guidance to address TDRs in the plan.

"During the meetings on the town center this past spring, I don't recall anything about Huntingtown village expanding

to the east side of Route 4," said Bowen. "Route 4 is going to get to the point that traffic lights are not going to be acceptable in order to travel all the way down to Prince Frederick."

Huntingtown resident Andrea Hurley drew comparisons between the 2010 comprehensive plan and the current draft, pointing out the 2010 plan states not to expand Huntingtown, St. Leonard or Lusby town centers across Route 2/4. The group believes the draft planned expansion of town centers and villages, intended to draw development away from other areas, actually promotes commercial development in some areas and eliminates appearance standards. A lengthy discussion on architectural review committees also ensued.

Bowen noted key items were missing from the plan, to include the document's purpose and, more importantly, an implementation plan specifying a timeline and who is going to accomplish the necessary tasks.

He noted the planning commission would typically take months reviewing a comprehensive plan before releasing it to the public and that agencies like the Maryland State Highway Administration, Maryland Department of Planning and health department would have an opportunity to weigh in. "We need to hear what they say, in addition to the planning commission and the county commissioners, before a plan is adopted," stressed Bowen, adding that citizens will only have one month to provide feedback and will not have an opportunity to review and comment after the full plan has been completed.

"Public participation has been the hallmark of the comprehensive plan for decades," said Bowen, encouraging citizens to provide input to the county on the draft plan by Dec. 8.

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