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Chesterfield plan draws criticism

Nearly every resident attending supervisors meeting opposes proposed comprehensive plan

BY ZACHARY REID
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Say this about Chesterfield County: Its residents have a passion for their future, and quite a few are certain that they have a better handle on that future than their county leaders.

With a public hearing on a proposed comprehensive plan on the agenda for the Board of Supervisors meeting Wednesday, the county's Public Meeting Room was as full as it has been in a year.

"It's certainly great to have so many citizens in attendance," said board Chairman Daniel A. Gecker.

For most of the night, 37 residents politely took turns disagreeing with nearly everything in the 200-plus-page plan, from what they said was an assault on property rights to

cellphone tower placement to bicycle paths to the idea that parts of the plan could guide the county for 100 years or more. Only one resident spoke in favor of the plan.

Quoting sources from James Madison to George Patton, a significant number of the speakers claimed the county was falling prey to Agenda 21, a United Nations program for sustainable development.

Ralph Carter, who represents the Chester Patriots — the tea party group eschews traditional leadership roles in its ranks — questioned the constitutionality of the whole process.

By our Constitution, he said, America was a "beacon of freedom," but under the sustained development approach, the county became a "source of planetary degradation."

George Emerson, the father of new School Board member Carrie E. Coyner and a developer whose planned communities dot the county, said he "adamantly opposed the plan" because it would make his line of work nearly impossible.

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"If we have to comply with everything in this plan, it'd be unbelievable," he said.

Daren Gardner, a regular speaker at board meetings, went third and was the first of many people to mention Agenda 21.

Gardner and other members of the Chester Patriots equate the United Nations plan with a plot to undermine property rights in Chesterfield.

Another Patriot said the plan sacrificed local control of land-use issues, then offered more than 20 pages of suggested changes for the plans. To applause, he asked the board to at least send the plan back to the Planning Commission for more study.

To Anne Scott Webb, a tree farmer from the Midlothian District, opposed the plan on a multitude of issues. She took particular exception to the county hiring a consulting group from Charlottesville, a city, she said, that was "a breeding

ground for progressive, liberal ideas."

If adopted, the comprehensive plan would steer growth and development issues in the county for years to come. It would be the first such plan in Chesterfield in more than two decades. In the years since, the county has used a series of at least 20 area land-use plans. The comprehensive plan would combine elements of those plans with other ideas developed by citizen groups, county staff and hired consultants in the nearly three years since the county began formulating the new plan.

Since the process began, county Planning Department staff have helped with 183 meetings on the plan, said Planning Director Kirk Turner.

The public hearing was a listen-only exercise for the four board members on hand. At the earliest, the board could vote on the plan at its Feb. 8 meeting.

Dale District member James M. "Jim" Holland was watching from home via the county's video feed while he recovered from an illness.

First look at capital plan

During its afternoon work session, the board received a preliminary look at the county's proposed five-year capital improvement plan. The \$532.7 million plan includes general county projects (\$165.6 million), school improvements (\$154.6 million) and utilities work (\$212.5 million).

The county proposes and approves a rolling five-year plan every year, with actual action typically taking place only on projects for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. This year, the plan is heavy on maintaining and renovating existing facilities, though it does suggest that several projects left from a 2004 bond referendum — including a new library and a fire station — could finally be built.

A public hearing on the plan is scheduled for March 14, and a vote by the supervisors is set for March 28.

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