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“Comp Plan” Update Moves Toward Approval

Citizens’ Time Worthwhile?

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Will it provide a new vision of Athens’ future, or amount to just a state-required academic exercise? Whichever it is, local citizens have put in over 2,000 volunteer hours in meetings to update the Athens-Clarke County (ACC) comprehensive land-use plan, ACC Planning Director Brad Griffin told commissioners at a work session Jan. 8. The update, required every 10 years, began over two years ago with an extensive rundown of local facts and figures compiled by Planning Department staffers, and followed by numerous meetings of citizens who each volunteered for one of eight subcommittees (on economic development, housing, the environment, land use, transportation, cultural resources, population and intergovernmental coordination/ facilities). The result is a 47-page document with numerous recommendations that will go to ACC Commissioners next month for approval.

But Griffin said he doesn’t expect the impact of the document to match the changes wrought by Athens-Clarke’s complete revision of its land-use plan in 1999. That revised plan encouraged in-town development and the preservation of a rural “greenbelt,” and the new zoning ordinance adopted the next year required sidewalks and parking-lot trees to be installed along with new commercial developments. In fact, Griffin told *Flagpole*, the process of “visioning” and citizen involvement required by the state’s Department of Community Affairs is mostly intended for counties that (unlike Athens-Clarke) have never taken such a land-planning approach before.

Some subcommittee recommendations were thrown out by Planning Department staffers, Griffin told commissioners at the work session. That was because they didn’t seem “doable” within the five-year timeline for the state to be checking up on the report, or because ACC Commissioners had previously rejected them, he said. Suggestions to the Clarke County School District were also considered out-of-bounds: “We can’t control what the school district does or doesn’t do,” Griffin told commissioners. But the result is that many recommendations are very general, and addressed to no one in particular. (“Promote a public education and awareness program in order to further promote the value of historic preservation,” reads a recommendation that is typical of many.) The report is available as the “Community Agenda” on the Planning Department’s website at www.accplanning.com/comprehensive.php. Griffin said that staffers who sat in on the citizen committees were instructed not to guide the deliberations there, even if they headed toward conclusions that the Planning Department would later edit out.

The process left some subcommittee chairs frustrated, though they’ve complimented county staffers for their hard work. Elizabeth Little, who chaired the environment subcommittee, hated to see the weakening of suggestions for innovative ways of dealing with stormwater.

“I was able to keep a lot of stuff in there,” she told *Flagpole* in December. “It was a little confusing, but I think it’s because it was a whole new way of doing it... the whole idea that they took it away, and Planning edited it, makes it look like it was done in a back room.”

Even if none of it actually was done in a back room, other committee chairs agree the process to date could have been

smoother. (In fact, the original schedule provided for review of of the combined recommendations by the subcommittee chairs before the document went to the Mayor and Commission, but that apparently hasn't happened.)

By the time the document went to the ACC Planning Commission for further editing, it was already "basically unrecognizable to me," complained Rachel Sleppy, who chaired the cultural resources subcommittee, in a letter she distributed to a Federation of Neighborhoods forum on the plan last week. She wrote that at one Planning Commission meeting on the topic, "many of us spoke up and pointed out that we were dissatisfied with the final draft, and asked to please be given an actual work session to discuss these matters." But the Planning Commission (which is also a citizens' body) decided simply to note in the document where its final version disagreed with the views of subcommittee chairs, and to include both versions.

The Planning Commission's version eliminated several references to global climate change, and squelched a controversial suggestion to add "potentially historic plant materials" to historic preservation requirements. Also removed: references to "insufficient water available to existing homes, institutions and industry" and a recommendation for more reservoirs. Planning Commissioners didn't think it was their business, either, to encourage banks to offer "location-specific mortgages" along bus lines, and removed a suggestion for educating people on how to maintain their septic tanks (although ACC Commissioners may restore it). A number of the report's remaining recommendations are already under consideration or headed toward implementation by the ACC government.

Griffin said the land-use plan is routinely referred to when land-use decisions are being considered. "It's really the broad-brush basis for all the reports that we write, and all of the developments that we look at," in addition to amendments to land-use ordinances, he told commissioners. But he emphasized that the update in itself won't make any changes in current zoning. One change that is being looked at, however, could mean moving toward lower "rural residential" density for certain areas in the greenbelt that are already zoned for single-family home development. That would allow a more subtle transition between suburban and rural zones, planner Lara Mathes told *Flagpole*.

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