

Prince William Conservation Alliance – March 2014 Rural Crescent Forum

Notes from Planning Director Chris Price's Presentation

View the presentation online at <http://vimeo.com/90362522>

1998 area formalized – The Rural Area – land use designation. Colloquially called the Rural Crescent. Counterpart is the development area.

Large lot zoning – not in Comp Plan, that Rural Area is a Growth Management Tool.

Rural Area exists in many chapters of Comp Plan: Land Use Plan , Sewer Plan, Parks and Open Space Plan, and other chapters. But there are conflicting statements and conflicting goals – unclear goals in planning documents.

2012-13 Price recommended to board bring in consultants to look at rural area:

Make sure what are our goals and objectives. Been since 1998 that have evaluated Rural Area. Revalidate goals. Talk to community, anything else should be doing?

Are goals we do have being effective? For example, one of principal goals is preservation of farmland. But over time farmland is diminuation. Not meeting goal. Any best practices out there we should look at, other land use planning tools?

Right now we have one-size-fits-all growth management plan. Rural area implemented largely through large-lot zoning, 10 acre lots. Is that the only way can achieve goals? Community meetings, hundreds of participants. Consultants going to have good info to bring forward – revalidate goals, or bring new goals forward. Increase clarity. Do things better.

Talk a lot about environmental preservation, houses vs farms. When do something in rural area, also affects development area. We have rural preservation goals that really should be central to our urban development goals. One of the principal reasons jurisdictions generally have a preservation area is to help achieve urban development goals. We have regional activity centers , centers of commerce and centers of community, transit-oriented development opportunities where could really maximize the infrastructure that already exists in PWC, and the Rural Area can play a part in that, but right now they are not linked together at all.

So one of the tools that is available, by way of example, is something called Transfer of Development Right (TDR) where a developer in the private market can negotiate with a private land owner, purchase development right, and instead of building houses in the Rural Area, they put a permanent conservation easement on the property, and then take that development density and apply it within the Development Area, the strategic areas that have infrastructure that can accommodate that growth.

So there are some smart planning tools that allow property owners and farmers to have much more financial gain, now and in the future, from their properties than they currently have. It allows real preservation with real conservation easements in perpetuity, rather than cutting land up into 10 acre lots, and it allows us to achieve our urban development goals.

So that's what we expect from the consultants, to bring us recommendations that preserve open space, preserve our environmental characteristics, serve as a grown management tool that supports our urban development goals, and provides some flexibility to property owners to do things in a variety of ways. If someone wants to develop and cut into large lots will always have that opportunity. But there are probably a variety of opportunities that are as good, or maybe much better, that can achieve better financial gain for the property owners, more overall open-space preservation, better environmental planning. Is there a better way than 10 acre lots so can have larger contiguous open space? They are looking for win-win solutions.

People are passionate, hears from people on all sides of this issue. But, at the margins, when people are talking about the issue, there is a lot of commonality. People have cracked this nut before. We really think that the consultants' recommendations will have something for everyone. Will give us better development, uh preservation goals, help us better achieve our urban development goals, and that they are measurable.

Right now, one of the biggest challenges in the Comprehensive Plan is, we have no measurable objectives for Rural preservation. So everything else in the Plan has Levels of Service standards that we are expected to achieve. We are measured how successful we are when achieving them, and we know to direct resources when we are not achieving them. With Rural preservation, we have no objective goals. There is no Level of Service for Open Space Preservation. There is nothing where someone can benchmark us and say are we doing a good job, are we not doing a good job. All we can do is describe what is happening within the community.

There are probably ways that we can deliver better Open Space planning and have measurable goals that the community can have as a standard, that the communities help to build, that the community can buy into that standard, and over time hold our feet to the fire to make sure that we are meeting that standard.

So really that was the intent of initiating the Rural Area Study. I think one of the misperceptions out there is that the Study is going to come back, and then the Board is going to adopt something. The Study is answering questions. The Board has asked very specific questions: Is there a better way? Are there planning tools out there, that are authorized for use in the State of Virginia, that we are not using? The answer to that is Yes, there are a lot of them. We generally use one: Large lot zoning. But there are a lot of tools that are probably better for the context that we are in.

We have a one-size-fits-all Rural Area policy. So the Rural Area exists along Route 15, near Nokesville, near Quantico. Those are very different areas. When you are along 15 and 29 your context is historic preservation, scenic views, Journey Through Hallowed Ground. When you are in Nokesville that is real small town America, it's a real rural community. And when you are in Quantico the rural preservation strategies should be centered around the base. The base has a critical mission, we want them to be here, we want them to be strategic partners. All of those areas are very different contexts. We have the very same land use planning tools that we apply across the county.

And then lastly, when an issue comes up with say a fence in say Dale City or in Gainesville, our ordinances are uniform. So we solve that problem, and now we've created a problem for people trying to do business in Nokesville, for example. We have very suburban zoning standards that we apply uniformly throughout the county. And is that really Rural? If we are really talking about a rural area, is that what we mean? We have had a very good conversation with the community, look forward to continuing the conversation, and appreciate opportunity to be with you today.