

Minutes

Northampton County Planning Commission

Joint Work Session

September 11, 2012

This was a recessed meeting of the Northampton County Planning Commission held on Tuesday, September 11, 2012, at 2:00 p.m. with the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee (CPAC). The joint work session was held in the Social Services training room located at 5265 The Hornes in Eastville, Virginia. The purpose of the meeting was to conduct a roundtable discussion with the CPAC concerning the status of the comprehensive plan update process.

Those present were Chair Martina Coker, Vice-Chair Michael Ward, Sylvia Stanley, Mary Miller, Dixon Leatherbury, Roberta Kellam and Severn Carpenter.

CPAC members in attendance were Chair Bill Parr, Vice-Chair Bill Payne, Pat Coady, Charles Bell, Billy Moore, Peter Lawrence and Richard Drury.

Also in attendance were staff members Sandra Benson Thornton, Director of Planning & Zoning; Peter Stith, Long Range Planner; and Kay Downing, Administrative Assistant.

The meeting was called to order at 2:02 p.m. and a quorum established.

Mr. Parr then called to order the meeting of the CPAC.

Introductions were made by all present.

The agenda was accepted as presented upon motion by Commissioner Kellam and second by Commissioner Carpenter. The motion to accept carried unanimously 7 to 0.

The CPAC also accepted the agenda as presented by unanimous vote as moved by Mr. Payne and second by Mr. Bell.

Mrs. Thornton gave a brief background overview of the process thus far including the timeline of events that had occurred during this review. She stressed that the Code of Virginia gives the local planning commission the responsibility of recommending the comprehensive plan to the local governing body such as the Board of Supervisors. She also noted that items reviewed during the review process are the same as when adopting a complete plan. During the prior update in 2005, the Board of Supervisors appointed a Comp Plan Advisory Committee and Steering Committee that was later disbanded. The current Board then appointed a new CPAC which is considered an ad hoc committee of the Board. The work of CPAC now is intended to primarily look at existing economic conditions, to review draft materials of the commission and to make comments. She noted that a local comp plan is mandatory by the Code of Virginia;

stipulated reviews of an existing comp plan are mandatory; but updates and amendments to existing comp plans are not mandatory unless deemed necessary through the review process. The Chair added that the public workshops were conducted throughout the county and towns in order to obtain information from a broad spectrum of county citizens. The Commission then utilizes that public information plus gathers other data then reviews data in order to make recommendations. She also stated that the updated comp plan vision statement is now being restructured in order to more accurately reflect its intent.

At this time, Mrs. Thornton referred to a work calendar that should be addressed later in the meeting once discussion is completed.

Mr. Parr asked if any CPAC members wished to ask questions of staff or the Commission at this time. There being none, he gave a brief background on the CPAC and its work process to date. The CPAC met initially with Spencer Murray, a member of the Board of Supervisors at that time, who provided his view of the existing economic conditions at that time. Mr. Parr noted that the CPAC is not focused on the broader spectrum of the review as is the Commission, but its objective is to define "economic vitality" and "economic success" for Northampton County. He stated that later in the process the CPAC received a more detailed directive from the Board and proceeded from there. Being aware of its limited experience and expertise, the CPAC made a conscience decision to learn more about economic development from many different experts at local and state levels. Many state entities have been used over the past months to better inform the CPAC about regulations, funding, objectives, etc. Information was provided by and meetings held with the Va. Department of Commerce, the Va. Department of Transportation, the local Public Service Authority, various local developers, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Finance Authority, the Department of Environmental Quality and Delegate Lynwood Lewis. He added that local developers are of the opinion that the county is deficient in customer service in the Dept. of Planning & Zoning and that a customer-oriented philosophy is needed. They also believe that the county has adopted regulations that exceed state regulations thereby preventing or inhibiting economic development. He also noted that pre-development meetings with potential businesses should be encouraged and should include local and state agencies to prevent development process delays. Mr. Parr noted that the CPAC had received outside support to fund an independent county-wide local level phone survey that provided a 95 percent confidence rating. The survey was related to the general status of the county as a whole and current status of economic development as seen from a public perspective.

Mr. Payne added that he is a relative newcomer to the area, but it was his opinion that the county needs a governance model and in order to be successful with economic development efforts, there should be a regional effort that will address and overcome codified and cultural barriers.

Mr. Drury added that economic development should be a sustainable model broad enough in context so that it can grow in the future.

Commissioner Kellam asked Mr. Parr for the definitions of “economic vitality” and “economic success”. He replied that no definitions have been developed yet by the CPAC but will be done in the future. He encouraged the Commission to develop its own concept of those two definitions as well so that each interpretation can be compared once defined.

Commissioner Kellam then questioned where additional tax revenue should be spent as smaller local communities are seeking sidewalks, street lights, playgrounds, etc., to add to their quality of life.

Mr. Bell stated that the CPAC has been given the charge to assist in enhancing citizens’ lifestyles. It was his opinion that too much emphasis has been invested towards one issue or group and not the whole community at large.

Mr. Parr stated that the phone survey revealed that the two top concerns among those polled are the economy/jobs and public education. There is a disenfranchised feeling connected to the economic status of the county.

The Chair expressed her concern about how the executive summary has been presented in actual responses to question 17 that asked respondents which industries and business opportunities may contribute to future job growth and business development. She emphasized that agriculture, aquaculture and tourism should be built on and not minimized. Question 17 in the CPAC presentation may be misleading because actual responses show 72% of respondents indicate that tourism can contribute to future growth (25% very effective versus 47% somewhat effective); and 71% indicated that agriculture can contribute to future job growth (22% being very effective versus 49% somewhat effective). She noted that growth should be promoted in and around the towns because it is more cost effective for infrastructure. Plus, statistics prove that Cape Charles has a growing tourism business that is providing tax revenue which supports the focus on growth in and around towns.

Mr. Payne added that tourism provides seasonal jobs for approximately 4 months of the year and that the CPAC is focused on increasing jobs as its fundamental objective.

Mr. Parr noted that Cape Charles’ infrastructure and the major private financial investments have led to its tourism growth.

Commissioner Miller noted that according to the Center for Economic Policy Research in Washington, D.C., a “good job” in the United States is defined as one that provides an annual pay of \$37,000.00 and helps to provide health insurance and a retirement plan. She added that only 24.6 percent of jobs meet such criteria at this time. It was her opinion that no company is going to come to Northampton County to invest based on its work force and education levels now. She stated that the local newspaper from September 3rd through the 7th listed 22 positions in the school system and 25 jobs in the health field that are unfilled.

Mr. Bell stated that the county is educating its students for other communities as they soon leave once they have graduated. It was his opinion that initiatives to work and to maintain healthy families have been stifled in the county. He added that very few jobs in the county are actually family-supportive by providing a good wage, health insurance, and retirement plans. He also noted that the breakdown of the family is having a negative impact.

Referring to the data on Cape Charles tourism, Commissioner Ward expressed his opinion that there is danger in just considering numbers on the surface. Based on the information provided, total revenue for the past fiscal year in Cape Charles has decreased \$60,000. It was his opinion that most of the vacation rental stock in Cape Charles may disappear when those houses are sold and occupied on a year-round basis.

Commissioner Kellam expressed her opinion that there may be an effort to dismiss or vilify tourism, agriculture, aquaculture and small businesses to the exclusion of other things. She recognized that these industries have not served every citizen, but suggested that the county either capitalize on these 4 industries and make them grow or search for something new. By verbal acknowledgement, it was the consensus of many in attendance that both avenues are needed in order to promote and grow economic development.

Mr. Payne stated his opinion that there is a frustration being felt and perhaps farming could be grown in a horizontal manner by allowing new businesses to compliment agriculture. He then stated that the term "small business" refers to a 5 to 10 million dollar company that hires at least 50 people on a full time basis and is not a "mom and pop" operation. The CPAC is trying to focus on drawing that type of small business to the county.

Mr. Coady agreed that the three emphasized economic industries of aquaculture, agriculture and tourism are fine, but are not sufficient because two of those three produce very little county tax revenues. He noted that aquaculture is a wholesale industry that ships its product out of the county thereby adding little sales tax revenue and has relatively little land area producing real estate taxes. Percentage wise, because of the ag-forestral districts, real estate tax revenues from farming is relatively low which has merit. While tourism is growing, data shows that most tourism revenue is centered around two towns right now. The county now gets most of its revenue from its residential tax base that is not growing. While tourism, agriculture and aquaculture are good and are needed, it is evident that there is an absence of anything else and these three alone are not getting the job done. There is a need for vertical integration that once existed such as canning plants. He noted that the top priority is to develop a business friendly atmosphere if new businesses are to locate here. He suggested that the county must be intentional to promote and focus on services that can support future wind operations and offshore drilling opportunities in order to compete with other coastal areas in the state. An example could be to permit an east coast safety course training facility that augments this type of off-shore industry since the nearest facility is now in Louisiana. Boat services may be needed for all off-shore industry and Oyster could be a perfect location for that type of support. It was his opinion that simply driving along US 13 does not encourage anyone passing through to stop and spend their tourism dollars here as there are very few attractions

to draw them off US 13. He noted that new economic growth is going to take a long steady process in order to see results. For example, if off-shore wind farms move forward then off-shore support can be provided in this county versus Lynnhaven in Virginia Beach. The county must become proactive and have a vision in determining what kind of services can be provided. Commissioner Miller stated that the county does have education positions and health jobs but there is a marketing problem. She noted that on-line courses are not being promoted.

Mr. Drury noted that almost 50 percent of the phone survey respondents were 64 years old who purchase property and also expect services.

Mr. Parr stated that systemic issues need to be addressed. The lack of good quality rental housing must be addressed by promoting accessory living units or guest houses by-right on parcels that are already developed with primary residences. Teachers, health care providers and others are in need of quality rental housing. He also concurred with Commissioner Miller that better marketing is needed.

Mr. Parr also addressed the devolution issue that the county will face when VDOT no longer maintains secondary state roads with that responsibility being transferred to localities. The county will be responsible for that expense and additional tax revenue will be needed. The county needs to investigate the possibilities of developing certain portions of U.S. 13 in a safe and economic manner in order to locate new businesses. One option is to adopt special tax districts to implement that goal.

Commissioner Ward agreed with Mr. Parr that the county will be facing the burden of additional future expenses not only in maintaining its road system but public education as well.

When asked by Commissioner Kellam, Mrs. Thornton stated that the Board has adopted a strategic capitals improvements plan which does not include road maintenance at this point as the state has not provided any dollar figures or date for road transference.

Commissioner Kellam agreed that tax revenue needs to grow and noted that some incorporated towns collect tax revenue not available to the county such as Exmore. She also expressed her opinion that referring to U.S. 13 as a linear city for development purposes is not a good concept because a city has people so a road cannot be a city. She also noted that many abandoned buildings already exist along U.S. 13 that were former business locations. The Chair concurred.

Commissioner Leatherbury stated his opinion that discussion has revealed several points: (1) health care and education related jobs are available now; (2) the need to identify what the county can offer to support potential offshore industries; (3) promotional or marketing standards under a unified theme such as adequate signage is needed; and (4) vertical integration of the farming industry should be pursued in order to sustain rural agriculture.

Commissioner Miller inquired if data had been reviewed by the CPAC related to demographics, health statistics, and education data.

Due to another appointment, Mrs. Thornton left the meeting at 3:50 p.m.

A general discussion of prospects and future impacts was held. Commissioner Ward noted that the new tourism commission is offering no assistance to the Town of Onancock in organizing or promoting its festivals. The Chair noted that the county's vitaculture industry is growing.

The Chair then distributed a comp plan review work calendar to those present for future review and discussion.

Mr. Coady stressed that economic development needs to be a regional effort in order to receive state funding that will be necessary to move forward. Mr. Parr agreed and it was noted that an economic development commission and an economic director should be established by the county to work with Accomack County's commission and director in correlation with the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission.

Mr. Parr also noted that Walla Walla, Washington has been proactive in expanding existing industry employment opportunities by implementing new work force training in golf course maintenance, wind turbine maintenance and wine-making in conjunction with its local community college.

Mr. Parr gave a brief summary of the report that will be presented at tonight's Board meeting. He noted that the CPAC will meet with the Board again on September 24.

By consensus of both, it was determined that a second joint work session of the Commission and CPAC would be established sometime in the future when deemed necessary and that today's meeting had proved to be beneficial.

Recess:

At 4:08 p.m., motion to recess until Wednesday, September 19th, at 7:00 p.m. was made by Commissioner Kellam, seconded by Commissioner Carpenter and carried unanimously 7 to 0.

The CPAC meeting was also recessed until the 5:00 p.m. Board meeting upon proper motion and second.

Chair

Secretary