

Summary of Planning Commission Work Session: August 8, 2023

Topic 1: Activity Centers

Summary of discussion: There was consensus from the Commission that the Activity Center approach should be used with the Comprehensive Plan update. The Commission was supportive of the Activity Centers concept, especially encouraging infill, redevelopment, walkability, and a mix of uses. The Commission indicated that the current number of centers (50) was too high, which reduced the effectiveness of the center concept, and made it difficult to prioritize public projects. If the centers are updated during AC44, the Commission wanted to make sure that the Community Advisory Committees had many opportunities for input, especially for the Places29 and Southern and Western areas where more significant changes would be proposed.

Center Locations and Place Types

- Should not be located in the middle of a primarily residential area if there is already an existing commercial/employment area. Should be focused on what's already working well and being used, otherwise it dilutes what's already there.
- There are too many total centers currently. Avoid overlapping centers or too many in one location.
- CACs should have significant input if there are changes compared with the current Master Plans.
- Building heights feel too prescriptive – could be more flexible. Could be higher (than the currently recommended 6 stories in Destination Centers) especially when public transit is provided.
- Provide a concept plan for Centers – what they could look like at a high level.

Infill, Redevelopment, Adaptive Reuse

- Need to achieve adaptive reuse and increased density through centers.
- Densify what's already there.
- Support for enhanced public transit.
- County should consider investing in structured parking.
- Consider transfer of development rights to encourage density and redevelopment in centers and balance open space preservation in other areas

Mix of Uses

- Centers should support building community. People should be able to walk to places to spend time together. If they're auto centric, it's harder to build community.
- Consider the micro compared with the macro – having a mix of uses over a larger area, compared with a mix of uses expected with each individual development.
- Should allow flexibility, but still ensure an overall a mix of uses.
- Should look at previously recommended centers from past plans and evaluate if they developed as prescribed or expected.
- Consider work from home trends and impacts to employment spaces over the next 20 years.

Amenities, Open Space, and Investment

- With Centers, should also have more greenspace and parks in the Development Areas that are accessible by walking, biking, and transit.
- Who would pay for these improvements with future development – would need to figure out what is expected from developers versus County investment or planning.
- Putting some public investment in some of the centers could be a catalyst for development. For example, a splash pad could encourage families to visit, which supports small businesses opening.
- Consider associated cost increases with added amenities, such as increased housing costs.

Topic 2: Factors for Future Development Areas Expansion

Summary of discussion: There was consensus from the Commission that the updated Comprehensive Plan should at a minimum have a set of factors for future Development Areas expansion that guide both timing and identifying locations. Some Commissioners were supportive of mapping potential locations for future expansion, though only at a general level (such as identifying broad areas or using heat maps). Some Commissioners expressed concern with any mapping of potential locations (especially at parcel-level detail), which could cause land speculation and increase land costs.

Developing Factors for Future Development Areas Expansion

- Factors allow County to be thoughtful about preservation.
- Efficient use of the current Development Areas must be the focus. Need to incentivize infill because the easier sites and greenfields will always be developed first.
- Add factors for measuring how the Development Areas are being used and being built out – are we achieving a mix of uses, higher density, walkability, redevelopment, quality open spaces. If we are not achieving our goals, should not expand.
- Portland OR has detailed criteria for Urban Growth Area expansion – good example to look at, could use something similar.
- Need to make sure the County is planning for adequate infrastructure, both within the existing Development Areas and in future expansion areas.

Considerations for Mapping Potential Future Expansion Locations

- Prudent to create a model for future expansion when not currently under pressure to expand.
- If going to map out potential locations, using a high-level heat map and general areas is preferable than specific parcels.
- Concern that mapping could cause land speculation and drive up the cost of land in any mapped locations. Concern that it could even cause prices to rise in areas that are not mapped but are nearby.
- Seems that land speculation has already been occurring – developers have already been guessing where expansion may occur in the future (even without mapping).
- Knowing where future infrastructure is needed would be useful to service providers, though there is concern that the current need for infrastructure is already significant enough that adding to the existing list would be challenging.

Development Areas Capacity

- We know there is not a significant amount of land left in the Development Areas (land use buildout estimated about 7% of the current Development Areas land has capacity); need to think about when we may reach the tipping point for accommodating demand.
- There is already a lot of opposition to higher density developments in the Development Areas, which means the Development Areas are not being used as efficiently as they could be.
- Avoid leapfrogging expansion and make sure there are investments and improvements in the current Development Areas and existing neighborhoods.

Economic Development and Business Needs

- It's an issue that there is only one Tier 4 site in the current Development Areas.
- By not being more proactive with economic development, the County could be missing out on opportunities.
- County needs to have land that attracts businesses; they won't come here if they feel like they will not be able to get application approvals, or the process will be too challenging.

Topic 3: Rural Crossroads Communities

Summary of discussion. There was consensus from the Commission that there should be a clear definition of crossroads communities and that there should be an updated list of crossroads communities. The Commission was supportive of the community resilience hubs concept and with building community, while noting that services should be supportive of current community members and not encourage significant additional residential development. The Commission had concerns about several land uses mentioned in community input and possible impacts to groundwater, waterways, and transportation. There was consensus from the Commission that further study of individual communities would be needed prior to any changes to land use designations or zoning districts, and that the special use permit process is important for identifying and mitigating potential impacts.

Access to Services (e.g. healthcare, emergency response/preparedness, community spaces, affordable food, job training) in the Rural Area

- Small-scale medical offices/services are desired.
- Services and businesses should be focused on supporting existing community members – do not want to encourage additional residential development.
- Having access to basic services supports equity and climate action (by reducing vehicle miles travelled).
- Use crossroads communities to put the elements together for building community – such as the community center, post office, and convenience center in Esmont/Keene.

Scale of Services and Uses in the Rural Area

- Scale is a key recommendation. Approved uses should be appropriately scaled for the Rural Area.
- It's possible to fit a lot of services in a relatively small footprint (such as North Garden). These uses need to be concentrated and small scale and avoid sprawl.

- Want to avoid any large-scale uses, though market forces likely would not support them anyway.

Considerations for Future Land Uses

- Some of the uses mentioned in the staff report (which were based on community input) would entail significant impact to the Rural Area.
- Concern with potential for auto and gas station uses to have leaking fuel tanks or other environmental contamination; also noting standards are higher than in the past.
- Restaurants use a lot of water and may not be feasible in some locations.
- Transportation impacts would need to be assessed for any recommended changes in land uses. Recommendations for traffic calming should be incorporated.
- Space for parking, availability of groundwater, and feasibility of septic systems could be challenges for future uses in the Rural Area.
- Changes in land uses for these places should be approved by special use permit to allow for review and mitigation of impacts – should not be by-right.

Topic 4: Rural Interstate Interchanges

Summary of discussion. There was consensus from the Commission to include recommendations in the updated Comprehensive Plan for future Small Area Plans for the Shadwell and Yancey Mills rural interstate interchanges, with the Shadwell interchange prioritized. The Commission asked that Option 2 for this topic be modified to remove specific recommended land uses, which should be determined during the Small Area Plan process. It is possible that the Small Area Plans would not recommend any changes to the current uses.

Small Area Plan Process

- The Small Area Plan process is when the recommended land uses should be decided. Without a more detailed study, it is too early to have a list of recommended land uses during the Comp Plan update (even high-level recommendations, such as commercial and office/flex/light industrial). Localized studies could determine that no changes are recommended, or that some additional land uses are found to be feasible.
- Gives the County the opportunity to be proactive for these areas and possibly avoid more concerning land uses.
- The Commission was overall supportive of using the Small Area Plan process for more detailed study of Shadwell and Yancey Mills. Two Commissioners preferred to have future land uses specifically focused on uses supportive of agriculture/forestry and the Rural Area, while the other Commissioners preferred to keep recommendations very high level at this time and leave flexibility for the Small Area Plan process.
- During the Small Area Plan process, adjacent areas should be evaluated as a key factor in addition to land uses, transportation, infrastructure, and natural resources protection.

Uses that Support Agriculture/Forestry at Rural Interstate Interchanges

- Consider allowing light industrial agriculture associated uses by-right at some rural interchanges (especially Yancey Mills), such as canning, drying hops, and food/livestock processing. Such uses would support climate action by reducing the distance local farmers need to drive to access these uses.

- Tourism uses bring revenue into the county and are often compatible with Rural Area character. Cited uses included campgrounds or kayak rentals for river access.
- Concern about family farms already being lost, especially around Yancey Mills.

Target Industries and Economic Development

- Tech firms and offices may not want to locate adjacent to interstates. Such uses often locate in places that are walkable and have businesses nearby, which are desirable traits for employees.
- The Project Enable Target industries list is too high-level and general to apply to the rural interstate interchanges as is.
- Some rural interstate interchanges should remain rural – not every exit needs to have businesses or services.

Shadwell Rural Interstate Interchange

- Shadwell should be the priority interchange for a Small Area Plan. This area would benefit from a more detailed plan and there are likely opportunities for additional intensity of uses.

Yancey Mills Rural Interstate Interchange

- Yancey Mills interchange already supports the Rural Area with the lumber mill. It reduces drive time by local users to access the mill, which supports climate action. If more profitable uses are allowed/encouraged, it could pressure the mill to relocate elsewhere.
- Uses at the interchange could take away from businesses in Downtown Crozet.