

Agriculture Resource Lands Meeting

February 4, 2008

Okanogan County Commissioners Hearing Room

123 5th Ave. N.

Okanogan, WA 98840

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 pm by Director of Planning, Perry Huston.

Director Huston handed out the following information for the participants to review for this and future meetings:

- ◆ WAC 365-190-050
- ◆ Kittitas County Comprehensive Plan – Section 2.3(c) – Resource Lands, *Commercial Agriculture Land Use*

Director Huston opened the meeting with a quick review of the minimum requirements set by Washington State for the Commercial Agriculture Land Use and discussed information already gathered.

Director Huston presented three maps done by the County GIS Mapping Department.

- ◆ Map showing what is recognized by the current comprehensive plan
- ◆ Map based on information from the Assessor's office which includes designated open space. He noted the disconnect between what is shown as ag land and is taxed as ag land.
- ◆ Map showing designated resource lands.

He noted the challenges with designating resource lands are:

- ◆ What happens when resource runs out
- ◆ Fear that once land is designated as farmland then all that can be done is farm.

He is looking to the group for direction on how to approach these concerns.

He reminded the group:

- ◆ Property rights are a reality
- ◆ Agriculture is part of the heritage of the County

These realities need to be addressed and the decisions made.

Considerations may be ideas such as:

- ◆ Cluster development
- ◆ Transfer of development rights

Director Huston also noted that many of the landowners hold land in terms of their retirement vs. keeping it for agriculture.

One member of the audience expressed concern that the farmer must be protected. She gave an example of Minnesota's approach to protect farmers financially with a retirement fund tied to the land. The process allowed younger farmers to purchase farms at low interest rates, incur lower taxes, as well as other incentives. She sees the problem of developers coming in, developing the land, and raising the value of the land so farmer's can no longer afford the land.

Director Huston noted Kittitas County froze the value of the land until the land changed use.

Another member of the group suggested the transfer of development rights thereby developing land not suitable for agriculture. Along this line, Director Huston commented on cluster development and transfer of development rights whereby density could be increased in marginal areas of rural lands rather than on prime agricultural land.

His question to the group is how the alternatives can be marketed to the County in order to make them feasible.

Several items of concerns expressed by the group included:

- ◆ Importation of food thus the importance of saving ag land
- ◆ Determining the economic value of ag land to the community
- ◆ Number of family farms lost each year and loss to the economy
- ◆ Cost of transportation to the farmer
- ◆ Increased out-sourcing of the food supply
- ◆ Losing cultural way of life
- ◆ Finding ways to preserve farms which are part of the tourist economy
- ◆ Look at ways to invite people to believe farms are part of our future
- ◆ Ag lands are part of viable habitat i.e. promotion of hunting
- ◆ Look at ways to have government assist in conservation of farm lands
- ◆ Turning ag lands over to Fish and Wildlife or other public agencies taking into consideration the land comes off the tax rolls
- ◆ Government cost for residential land vs. farm land for services and infrastructure

Director Huston explained the concept of transfer of development rights and cluster development as ways to keep ag lands into perpetuity. He also explained how the assessor values the land and the effects of tax collections. It was noted giving up value on the ag land is usually made up when a developer improves the land from the transfer of development rights.

Director Huston explained the concept of offering bonus points through the process of cluster development whereby increased density would be granted to a

developer for including such items as buffer zones, recreation areas and open space as part of the development.

Suggestion for the criteria for transfer of development rights might be to:

- ◆ Land not suitable for commercial ag. or grazing lands
- ◆ Water supply consideration
- ◆ Cost of infrastructure
- ◆ Location close to existing transportation and existing infrastructure
- ◆ Developer pays improvements
- ◆ Water rights (irrigation) used for development
- ◆ UGA weighted density bonus
- ◆ Preservation of habitat & aquatic areas
- ◆ Access to schools/availability of services
- ◆ Idea of buffers around ag areas
- ◆ Developing close to urban areas – smaller parcels; further from urban center larger parcels
- ◆ A right to farm ordinance
- ◆ Allow for change of farming practice
- ◆ Anyone who is using irrigation water for the common good instead of crops should pay full rate of cost to produce water

Director Huston explained the elements of the comprehensive plan which included economic development, affordable housing and how the population increases will be considered. He will bring a draft of the Table of Contents for the comprehensive plan revision for comment at the next meeting.

He explained all the pieces have to fit together such as septic requirements, subdivision regulation, underlying zones, water, affordable housing, rentals, etc. Growth should be in the areas that make sense.

He said the definition of rural is what is left over after consideration of the various areas such as cities, public lands, etc. The three designations in the rural area will be:

- ◆ Low density
- ◆ Medium density
- ◆ High density

Addressing water concerns, Director Huston said taking water rights out of the upper reach areas of the county and transferring them into areas outside the county will have long terms effects.

For the next meeting, the group should think about:

- ◆ Elements of ag lands
- ◆ Density
- ◆ Options for establishing density of resource lands

- ◆ Protection of land and the farming activity
- ◆ The notion if you are a farmer you can't develop your land but the "scab rock" owner can
- ◆ Allowed use in ag lands
- ◆ Tools necessary to keep ag lands viable

He outlined the following schedule for the comprehensive plan revision:

- ◆ The first draft of the comprehensive plan revision will be out around the end of June at which time there will be a Second Growth Summit meeting.
- ◆ The following three months after the Growth Summit meeting will be spent working over the draft and making changes.
- ◆ Sometime during the fourth quarter of 2008, Director Huston will be putting the plan out for SEPA review.
- ◆ The plan will be submitted to the Planning Commission during the first quarter of 2009.
- ◆ Bring the Plan to the Board of County Commissioners and receive approval prior to the end of June 2009.

He commented this is an aggressive schedule but it is necessary in order to complete the goal of a revised comprehensive plan in a timely manner.

The next meeting for the ag land resources will be on March 3rd at 6:30 p.m. in the Commissions Hearing Room. The Agenda and the Minutes to this meeting will be posted on the Okanogan County Planning Department website during the week of February 11, 2008 and will also be e-mailed/mailed to those attending the meeting.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sharon S. McKenzie
Administrative Assistant
Okanogan County
Office of Planning & Development