

Comment on Zoning Plan, prepared for general submission and for presentation before Okanogan County Planning Commission, 3/28/16

To Okanogan County Planning, BOCC, Planning Commission:

Folks, I'll be brief. I am a volunteer firefighter. I was a couple hundred yards from the guys who died last year on Woods Canyon. I was safe, but, then, they thought they were, too. Their deaths were, in my opinion, largely attributable to the fact that Woods Canyon Road is a narrow, winding dead-end road. Others got out, but barely, with huge amounts of skill and luck.

I have done a lot of triage on homes in this area, and it bothers me a lot that a large proportion of them are, in a wildfire, pretty much indefensible: narrow driveways with no alternative egress, overgrown lots, highly combustible construction materials, ill-thought-out designs, you name it. Trying to save them is a very, very dangerous waste of my time, so I move on to places I can hope to save without quite so much risk to my life. Then I and my colleagues get disparaged and hollered at because we didn't save something that, frankly, shouldn't have been built that way in the first place.

I'm concerned that the new Zoning Code, as envisioned, is going to result in proliferation of this kind of residence. As I understand it, large areas of the county will be zoned for single- and multi-family habitation on small lots. This might make sense if there were any reasonable prediction that we were going to have a huge influx of people, with an increase in density and concomitant improvement of services. But what it really means is that people are going to buy and build in remote areas with little density and lousy infrastructure, and, next time, I'm going to be expected to chase out to the middle of nowhere to save a house that can't be saved, in an area that I can't safely get out of when things go to hell.

There are ways to fix this. One way is to implement something like the International Wildland-Urban Interface Code, or at least parts of it. From what I've seen, this isn't likely to happen: lots of effort, as I understand it, went into trying to adapt the IWUIC to Okanogan County, and the whole project got tossed out, presumably because people around here don't much like regulation. That being the case, the best approach is clearly to limit development in areas that cannot be protected in any reasonable manner against wildfire. Maintain large lot sizes. Establish conditional uses with mitigations, as necessary, to ensure that development that IS allowed complies with reasonable anti-wildfire practices, to protect the homes and residents, as well as the firefighters who, inevitably, will have to work there. If you open this area up to an uncontrolled land-use free-for-all, I can guarantee that people will die in wildfires to come. I hope it's not me.

Thanks

Alan Fahnestock