

To: Roxana King
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(Electronically submitted)

From: Isabelle Spohn
PO Box 24
Twisp, Wa. 98856

Dear Ms. King:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit comments related to the upcoming revision of the 2014 Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan.

Summary:

The county is in litigation regarding this document, and it needs to be done correctly this time. Procedural requirements must be followed in addition to full consideration of the substantive issues. Rushing forward without a good plan that passes muster could be disastrous to the planning effort in this county.

I am in agreement with the suggestions for revisions made in letters from the Methow Valley Citizens Council and Futurewise regarding organization of the Plan, realistic timing for completion, protections for ground and surface water, provisions for safety regarding wildfire, and the other issues they have addressed. I wish to add the following information and suggestions to the input you have received from these organizations. In summary, my comments deal with these issues:

*The need for the Planning Department to research, consider, and incorporate the best available suggestions from the American Planning Association and scientific studies in regards to the national wildfire situation in fire-dependent environments such as Okanogan County.

*The need for coordination among the various elements of the Comprehensive Planning process. The Community Wildfire Protection Plan is one example.

* The Comprehensive Plan fails to address the vulnerability of Okanogan County (and specific areas of the county in particular) to wildfire, landslides, and the disastrous effects of these events - in spite of available data.

*The Comprehensive Plan fails to include policies and language which would guide and support effective mitigations for wildfires and landslides in other county ordinances, including the Zoning ordinance.

* R-1 zoning allowed by this Comprehensive Plan in areas that have been identified as prone to fires or landslides pose a risk to life and property.

*There is a need for More Completely Planned Areas in such a large and diverse county as ours, and the need for a reasonable process for creating these areas that is not burdensome for citizens.

*The Methow Valley More Comprehensive Area needs to be updated and corrected.

*Goals for the growing health threat of poor air quality due to wood combustion should be addressed.

A) Wildfire

Summary: The County Comprehensive Plan should incorporate the Community Wildfire Prevention Plan, along with policies supporting measures to mitigate for large wildfires and related landslides. Overlays identifying areas at risk for fires and landslides should be developed from available BAER data and other data from the Carlton Complex and other fires. These overlays should be utilized in developing a zoning ordinance with appropriate densities and designs for development to mitigate for future expected large wildfires and related dangers.

For example: Where do alluvial fans lie, especially those related to severely burned areas? How do we avoid development in these areas, some of which have previously been considered prime spots for residential development, but which we now know are susceptible to landslides?

The Carlton Complex wildfire of 2014 occurred immediately preceding the adoption of the current 2014 version of the Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan. At that point, large wildfires in the U.S. had increased 300% since the mid-'80's. This trend is not expected to change, and in fact this data is most likely already out of date as we attempt to update the 2014 Comp Plan. http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/climate_change/pdf/Preisler_Westerling_March07.pdf.

Okanogan County has been no exception to this trend. The fires of the summers of 2012-2017 have highlighted the failure of our documents to address the risk to public safety created by these increasing fires. The Comprehensive Plan fails to provide policy and guidance regarding the County's susceptibility to wildfire, landslides and the public's welfare related to these ongoing events. There is no guidance that would support

decisions regarding vacation of public roads that could be used for public egress during wildfires. The Twisp River fire especially highlighted the danger to firefighters and residents alike when significant development is allowed in drainages full of vegetation and accessed by narrow, winding roads. The related Zoning Ordinance is equally inadequate in protecting the public. Both documents should be revised before adoption, utilizing information gathered from the past decades of increasing wildfires across the West and our local fires in particular.

1. Coordination of the Various Elements in a Comprehensive Plan is often the “missing link” in wildfire plans.

In 2005, The American Planning Association published Planning for Wildfires (Planning Advisory Service Report Number 529/530), a study stimulated by increasingly destructive wildfires across the West, including a massive complex that raged through southern California in 2003, destroying 3,631 structures, injuring 246 people, killing 24, and later resulting in flooding that killed 16 people. The wildfires occurring as we now write are even more severe.

One significant finding of this report regarding important strategies for development is: “An examination of the relationship of lands in the WUI (Wildland Urban Interface) to land-use, community facilities, and transportation proposals in the other elements of the comprehensive plan to ensure there are no conflicts and the elements are mutually supportive. This particular component is the missing link in many of the wildfire plans reviewed by APA. For example, land-use designations of one or two acres in areas prone to wildfires are certainly going to cause conflicts. Similarly, transportation routings that do not allow multiple access points into and out of a developing area or are inadequate in width are another.” (p.80) These are exactly the flaws in the 2014 Okanoga County Comprehensive Plan.

2. The Okanogan Wildfire Protection Plan was written to provide precisely the type of necessary coordination that the American Planning Association identified as often the “missing link” - but it stipulated incorporation into the county Comprehensive Plan, which did not occur.

Okanogan County’s 2006 Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), was agreed upon by over 50 agencies, county departments, local fire departments, and citizens. It was updated in 2013.

The CWPP identified areas vulnerable to wildfire, many of which in 2014 were devastated by the Carlton Complex Fire, the largest fire in Washington State history. The plan also addressed the danger of related landslides, which in 2014 also occurred in many severely burned areas of the Carlton Complex.

The CWPP identified necessary mitigation measures, assigned to various agencies and departments, with target dates for completion. Some of the originally assigned duties included such measures as development of evacuation routes with signage, alternate safety zones, connection of dead-end roads when possible, mapping of on-site water sources, alternate safety zones.

3. The Comprehensive Plan fails to incorporate the CWPP, deleting it instead in the 2014 version of the Comp Plan. This leaves the public vulnerable to land use planning which ignores disasters that are likely to reoccur without mitigation measures.

The County Commissioners were charged with the job of assuring that the updated 2013 CWPP was incorporated into the updated Comprehensive Plan; but instead, any reference to the CWPP has now been removed. And despite warnings from the American Planning Association (APA) against dense development in fire-prone areas, the final Comprehensive Plan supports a zoning map designating one-acre minimum lot sizes in the Lower Methow Valley (Gold Creek, McFarland Creek, French Creek, Alta Lake, Pateros area, north of Brewster, and elsewhere – many of the same areas in which homes were devastated by wildfire in 2014. (See County Interim Zoning map in comparison with Soil Burn Severity map, which also depicts fire perimeter.)

In the Okanogan County Community Wildlife Protection Plans (CWWP) of 2006 and 2013, the County Commissioners were charged with the duty of assuring that the CWWP was incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan. (p. 96, 2013 CWWP.)

6.1.i: Incorporate the Okanogan County Community Wildfire Protection Plan into the Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan, where applicable.

Under the 2013 “status” column for this task, the text reads:
“Completed –Pending Approval of County Comprehensive Plan.”

However, not only was this task not “Completed,” even mention of the All Hazards Mitigation Plan and CWPP in prior review editions of the Comp Plan were deleted.

Since the Carlton Complex fires of 2014, other large fires have consumed much of the county. Much has been learned. For example, it is clear that homes put off an incredible amount of heat as they burn. This relates to the densities allowed in fire-prone areas of the county.

A conscientious review of data gained since then from fires in Washington and other areas of the United States should be conducted by the Planning Department and Planning Commission before revising the Comprehensive Plan. While the emphasis upon difficulties of expanded development in the Wildland Urban Interface is appropriate,

newer experience and information shows that some fires are not avoided even with careful Firewise principles intact. Such new information requires careful consideration.

Language in the Comprehensive Plan that would support such planning and ordinances is necessary.

4. The Comprehensive Plan fails to address the vulnerability of Okanogan County (and specific areas of the county in particular) to wildfire, landslides, and the disastrous effects of these events - in spite of available data.

Not only does the Comp Plan fail to incorporate the CWPP as promised by the Commissioners, it fails to even mention the words “wildfire” or “landslide.” It fails to alert the reader in any way as to the fact that our county, and certain areas in particular, are at high risk for these natural disasters.

In addition, the evidence that our climate is changing and increases in wildfire in North America (especially east of the Cascades) compels some sort of action on the part of our local government to do what is possible to protect the public interest (US Fish and Wildlife, Climate Change in the Pacific Region, <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/climatechange/changepnw.html>.)

Virtually all future climate scenarios predict increases in wildfire in western North America, especially east of the Cascades, due to higher summer temperatures and earlier spring snowmelt. Fire frequency and intensity have already increased in the past 50 years, and most notably the past 15 years in the shrub steppe and forested regions of the West. The area burned by fire regionally is projected to double by the 2040s and triple by the 2080s. The probability that more than two million acres will burn in a given year is projected to increase from 5% (observed) to 33% by the 2080s. USFS and CIG researchers have linked these trends to climate changes. Drought and hotter temperatures have also led to an increase in outbreaks of insects, such as the mountain pine beetle, increasing the risk of fire. (Littell et al., 2009)

5. The Comprehensive Plan fails to include policies and language which would guide and support effective mitigations for wildfires and landslides in other county ordinances, including the Zoning ordinance.

Planning for Wildfire (American Planning Association, ISBN 978-1-932364-07-1, 3/30/2005, p. 81) lists standard techniques that constitute good practices for programs of regulation and enforcement - including zoning regulations:

“Zoning regulations establishing wildfire overlay districts for high-risk areas identified by a comprehensive plan and either requiring the clustering of development, restrictions on development in areas of steep slope and flammable vegetation, or extremely large lot

sizes (lots sizes greater than one acre.)”

None of these requirements are incorporated into our zoning regulations, nor are they supported by policies in the Comprehensive Plan.

In comparisons of the Interim Zoning Map with the Carlton Complex Map and “Soil Burn Severity”, one can see that the yellow areas of the zoning coincide with some of the most severely burned properties in the areas of McFarland Creek, Squaw Creek, French Creek, Alta Lake, Pateros and surrounding areas, and the areas north of Brewster.

Although water is already over-allocated in especially the Lower Reach of the Methow Valley (see previous MVCC Comprehensive Plan comments) neither the Comprehensive Plan nor Zoning Ordinance addresses the issue of adequate water availability for fire-related purposes. This is especially crucial in “closed” drainages of the Methow Valley, where permitted wells often have very low yields for fire suppression and maintenance of green space. This type of information calls for a careful look at densities in any of the “closed” drainages in the Methow Valley and in other areas of the county in which wells and creeks yield very little water for fire prevention and fire fighting.

6. R-1 zoning in areas that have been identified as prone to fires or landslides pose a risk to life and property. These small lots, along with multi-family dwellings, will be allowed (per the 2014 Comp Plan and Zoning) in remote areas along one-land roads with no second exit route (and as mentioned above, often without adequate water for maintaining protective green space or fire suppression.)

Due to the failure of the Comprehensive Plan to provide for needed coordination among agencies and county departments, the resulting Okanogan County Interim Zoning Ordinance (and maps) designate areas with transportation routings which do not allow multiple access points into or out of developing areas and are often inadequate in width for one-acre lot size minimums. Overlays for fire-prone areas and areas of geographic instability should be developed from available BAER maps and data, avoiding dense population and development in such areas.

A graphic example is the North Fork of Gold Creek. A look at a topographic map of the North Fork of Gold Creek shows only one access road in the area and is designated for one-acre zoning (R-1) despite the narrowness of the road, the steep terrain, the lack of possible multiple access points, and despite the documented high risk of the area (below.) Burning and rolling logs during the Carlton Complex nearly trapped myself and my husband as we drove on this road to leave the area. The R-1 designation has also been made in spite of the fact that the area is further than one mile from Highway 153 (criterion used for minimum lot size over one acre according to the current plan.) All of this demonstrates the need for more careful review of the Zoning Ordinance with an eye

to fire, and very supportive policies in the Comprehensive Plan for such review and consideration.

According to the BAER report, risk levels for this area (Gold Creek) are:

Very High to High: for Human Life and Safety, Property, Motorized Access along roads, Homes, and Outbuildings. (p. 6)

High: for Natural Resources (Steelhead Critical Habitat – p. 7)

This area is clearly inappropriate for 1-acre minimum lot sizes, as are other areas county-wide in the current Interim Zoning Ordinance. The Comprehensive Plan should inform and support a Zoning Ordinance that identifies such areas and mitigates the dangers in coordination with recommendations of professional groups such as the American Planning Association.

B. More Completely Planned Areas:

Regarding this requirement: “Future CPAs may be established by the County Commissioners after a request by petition from a majority of landowners who together own 2/3rds of the acreage within the newly proposed CPA”:

The above requirement is far too stringent to be practical to establish a More Completely Planned Area such as the Lower Methow Valley and is inconsistent with the requirements for creating other land use areas by citizen request such as recreation areas and so forth. The resident population is small, yet many properties are owned by either absentee landowners or landowners who do not reside in that part of the county. The bar should be far more realistic.

State law states: “The comprehensive plan may also be amplified and augmented in scope by progressively including more completely planned areas consisting of natural homogeneous communities, distinctive geographic areas, or other types of districts having unified interests within the total area of the county. (RCW 36.70.340) There is no requirement for lengthy and difficult petition procedures. One can only wonder why the county would have included this requirement, which was never placed upon either the Mazama Advisory Committee nor the Methow Valley More Completely Planned Area.

The Lower Methow is an area that has many “factors that are important in providing logical land use areas.”(County language) It is also “a natural homogeneous community, a distinctive geographic area and a district having unified interests,” (State language) as shown by community meetings held by the Lower Valley Advisory Group in the years 2007-08 or so. (Unfortunately, the Lower Valley Advisory Group was never officially appointed by the County and according to my recent document requests, the county has

not been able to produce a list of the membership.) These interests would include a high propensity for fast-moving wildfire, an agricultural economic base (apples) overallocation of water resources as determined by studies now being used by county committees and personnel in their planning efforts (Aspect, etc), a need for more water than is usually available in that area for wildfire prevention and suppression, sharing of wildlife populations with the upper Methow Valley (including sensitive/endangered species such as wolves, lynx, salmon, and bull trout -as well as the state's largest migratory deer herd.) It would indeed be an area that should be considered also for a Water Adequacy Study Area. In fact, it the Lower Methow composes a large portion of the Methow River Basin yet has few of the protections enjoyed by the upper Methow.

C. Methow Valley More Completely Planned Area:

1)The legal description of this area is incorrect. School District 350 does not coincide with the South line of Sections 22, 23, and 24 as stated below:

“It includes all private land within the Methow River drainage North of the South line of Sections 22, 23 and 24, Township 31 N., Range 22 E.W.M. The study area is the same area as School District 350.”

2) It is stated in the 2014 Plan that : “Due to the time that has passed between original adoption and adoption of this More Completely Planned Area Plan, a new Advisory Committee will need to be appointed by the Okanogan County Commissioners consistent with Chapter 7 of the Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan.”

Almost 3 years later, such a group has not been appointed by the County. This shows little intention on the part of the county to comply with its Comp Plan of 2014. It must be done and the membership of the group recorded.

D. Advisory groups to Planning Commission for Comprehensive Planning as mandated by statute must be created

Our County is large and diverse. In their wisdom, both the government of Washington State and the County of Okanogan mandated Comprehensive Planning, Planning Commissioners, and Advisory Committees to the Planning Commission in 1971:

1) Okanogan County Ordinance #1971-0001 (in compliance with Section 30.64.700, Revised Code of Washington) created:

Section 4: Area Advisory Committees of sufficient number to provide the Planning Commission with adequate sources of advice and counsel on matters pertaining to specific areas within the county.

2) In current county code, advisory committees to the Planning Commission are confirmed, citing State law and County Code.

2.64.040 Advisory committees.

Area advisory committees of sufficient number to provide the planning commission with adequate sources of advice and counsel on matters pertaining to specific areas within the county are established. (Ord. 71-1, W-258, § 4, 1971).

Unfortunately, Okanogan County does not have such committees. My recent document requests revealed that neither the Board of County Commissioners nor the Department of Planning and Development had lists of any planning committees for the areas of Okanogan County. The Mazama Advisory Committee exists, but the county had no record of the membership until the committee itself was asked for the names. No other area of the county has an advisory committee to advise the Planning Commission on the current effort to revise the Comprehensive Plan of 2014. There is also no record of members on any committee that may have advised the Planning Commission regarding the current Comprehensive Plan of 2014.

Such committees must be established to inform the Planning Commission upon issues important to the various areas of the County during the current effort to revise the Comp Plan of 2014. The County is out of compliance with current County code, which was written for very good reasons.

E. Air Quality - What are the goals of the Comprehensive Plan for this increasing threat from wood combustion?

Air quality is emerging across the West as a serious health problem, in view of increasing wildfire activity. But accompanying the wildfire issue, there is also a demand emerging for more forest “management” in terms of increased logging and thinning of public lands. Along with increased logging and thinning come increased slash that must be somehow removed - or it merely increases the danger of wildfire. One major practice is to remove this slash through burning piles of logging/thinning debris.

How will this be done without increasing woodsmoke in the air, increasing the huge amount of woodsmoke residents are now breathing from wildfire? What alternatives can be explored? What support or direction does the Comprehensive Plan give for any potential mitigations in the face of these difficult problems that are now facing public health and resource management?

What are the goals of the Comprehensive Plan for protection of its citizens in relation to air that is acceptable for a healthy life?

F. Periodic Comp Plan Review Must be Assured

Provisions for periodic Comp Plan review every 5 years has been deleted from this edition, leaving no reason to hope this Comprehensive Plan will be updated within a reasonable period of time. The county has taken almost 40 years to update the existing comp plan; the Critical Areas Ordinance and Shorelines Master Program are years overdue from the original deadlines. Why should the public believe there is any intention of review before the next wildfire and mudslide events sweep through our county, affecting development that has occurred in the meantime? Please establish provisions for periodic review.