

Southeast Guilford residents give county leaders straight talk about region's future growth

By Kim Cable Brafford
Forest Oaks Community Association

Guilford County Planning Director Greg Niles and county planner Trevor Nuttall hosted a forum Tuesday night to hear Southeast Guilford County residents' ideal vision for the Alamance Creek Area Land Use Plan, but for the first hour, they were peppered with questions about existing issues over which the planning department has no control.

Residents asked Niles and Nuttall whether they could stop plans for a proposed asphalt plant on Liberty Road, whether the City of Greensboro could annex landowners' property without consent and what, if anything, the planning department could do about a negligent shopping center landlord.

Niles and Nuttall got a glimpse of a citizenry that is deeply concerned about the direction of its future.

"I find it encouraging that the citizens have a passion for their area and community," Niles said after the meeting. "All the Area Plans are citizen-based plans; we are merely there to offer directions and suggestions. There were some peripheral items out there, but again, they speak to that passion."

The Alamance Creek Area Land Use Plan is a map designating how residents want certain areas to grow. Its territory roughly forms an upside down triangle bounded by I-40, Mt. Hope Church Road, Old Julian Road, Liberty Road and N.C. Highway 421. The plan was last updated in 1994. Since then, the region's needs have changed, water and sewer connections have become available to previously ineligible areas, and the actual area covered by the plan has decreased, notably when the Town of Pleasant Garden incorporated.

The purpose of the citizens' meeting Tuesday at Alamance Presbyterian Church was to gather input on what types of residential, commercial and industrial growth — if any — residents would like to see in the coming years. The land-use plan will serve as a guide to which county leaders can refer when, for example, a developer files a rezoning petition. If the rezoning request conflicts with what local citizens have outlined in the area land-use plan, then the county would support residents' wishes.

"The purpose of this plan is to offer some predictability to homeowners ... to get some idea of what may be developed in your area in the future," Nuttall told the crowd of about 75. "This plan is really aimed at guiding future development. We, the staff, are the first line of defense for your plans. Ultimately, the final decision makers are going to be your county commissioners."

Residents at the meeting said they'd like to see grocery stores, restaurants, banks, doctors' offices and an additional post office in the region. They would also like to retain

open green spaces. They don't want to see dense residential development, heavy industry or too much growth too quickly.

Many homes in this portion of the county sit on at least an acre because they are on septic tanks, which require more space than city sewer connections. An acre on the city sewer system could serve up to three homes. Since the city agreed in July to extend water and sewer lines to some areas of the county, residents who like the agricultural feel of the region expressed concern that a much denser residential landscape could emerge. It's a concern that has to be balanced with residents' desires for more commercial services.

"I think there will be pressure in these areas where you may see folks ... trying to get more density," Nuttall said. "The Southeast portion of the county has been slower than other portions of the county with development, only because, I believe, that the soils out here didn't support the type of development you're seeing in Northwest Guilford county — and now Northern Guilford county and other areas.

"There may be other things: The community didn't want to grow that rapidly, and that can remain. But I think that with Greensboro now opening up this area for utilities, and knowing that poor soils in the area have played some part in the slower development of the area, I would imagine that you will see some rapid acceleration in the next couple years."

Although the Alamance Creek Area Land Use Plan cannot dictate to whom the city extends water and sewer services, the plan could specify that residents prefer that lot sizes be at least one acre.

"Any type of issues that longtime residents or new residents have recognized as problems or opportunities, we want to note those and somehow reflect those in the plan," Nuttall said.

"If you feel that the commercial services available to you in this area are sufficient, and they're sufficient to serve any type of growth that may occur — be it a lot of growth, minimal growth — then we're not going to see a lot of new commercial areas designated to change on this map. But if you all say, 'We don't need car dealerships, we don't need pool halls, but we really need a grocery store,' those are going to be the kind of things that we also want to know and help get into the plan."

The recently formed Southeast Guilford Community Association, a committee of two dozen citizens who want to be a voice for the region with county leaders, has been meeting monthly to work on the Alamance Creek Area plan and presented a sketch of their working proposal at Tuesday's meeting. Among their suggestions is designating part of N.C. Highway 421 as a scenic corridor.

"We'd like to try to create a scenic corridor status where people drive in and say, 'Hey, this is an interesting, special place,' to try to start creating an image for Southeast Guilford County that, 'Hey, this is a unique spot. This might be a place I'd like to come and live, raise a family,' whatever," said committee member Darin Thomas.

The association is working closely with Niles and Nuttall and has proposed several areas that need further study: property across from Alamance Elementary School; the interchange at Williams Dairy and N.C. Highway 421; the interchange at Alamance Church Road and the I-85 bypass; and the intersection of Youngs Mill Road and the bypass.

Thomas stressed that the group's proposed map is still a work in progress.

“This map does not need to be officially adopted,” he said. “This map needs to be hacked on, chopped up and then other ideas presented. The net result of all this is ‘this is what we want southeast Guilford to look like.’”

The county planning department will hold another meeting in the future to hear more input from residents; the date has not been set. In the meantime, if you’d like to share your ideas about how the area should grow, send your comments to: Guilford County Planning, Attn: Trevor Nuttall, P.O. Box 3427, Greensboro, NC 27402. Or fax them to (336) 641-6988.

The department specifically seeks comments on commercial services, different housing types, and areas requiring special attention or further study.

“I truly hope that there is trust building with the community,” Niles said after the meeting. “I live in Greensboro. That being said, it is critical for the success of my department to develop rapport with the citizens we serve, and frank, candid dialogue, with meaningful, accurate follow-up, is the best way to achieve that.”