

April Workshops Address Growth in Rural Areas

The Commonwealth Regional Council (CRC) hosted two half-day workshops in April where attendees learned more about preparing for growth in rural communities. The workshops, facilitated by the Virginia Cooperative Extension, were held on April 13 and April 27 in the Mill Room.

April 13 – Smart Growth and Comprehensive Plans

Jesse Richardson, a professor at Virginia Tech, discussed the difference between growth and sprawl and the difference between growth control and growth management. Growth management involves reasonable projections of growth and how best to accommodate it. Two pillars of smart growth are to encourage development in appropriate areas, and to discourage development in resource areas.



Dr. Michael Chandler discusses the importance of having a Comprehensive Plan at the April 13 workshop.
(Photo by Todd Fortune)

He made a distinction between growth and sprawl (the big difference is that growth is inevitable, while sprawl is not), and addressed a number of myths regarding growth. They include: If you zone for development, or build houses, people will come; downsizing and easements will stop growth; and you can reduce housing by restricting supply (and, conversely, more supply means more growth).

Richardson said you can control growth – where it goes (on a small scale), and what it looks like (within limits) – and that no-growth strategies sometimes backfire. Tools available to localities for controlling growth include cluster development, Planned United Developments, Urban Development Areas, Purchase of Development Rights programs, and Transfer of Development Rights programs. Richardson said you need a “pragmatic balance,” and localities need to prioritize lands to develop and conserve. Localities need to prioritize goals and have a plan. Richardson compared having a plan to driving in a car. “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’re probably not going to get there,” he said.

Dr. Michael Chandler, Director of Education with PlanVirginia, discussed the importance of having Comprehensive Plans. He said that even though the State mandates a Comprehensive Plan for each locality, the mandate shouldn’t be why you plan. Chandler said a Comprehensive Plan needs to have a change strategy and should “read like a good story” with a beginning, middle, and end. Chandler said that growth comes, but oftentimes infrastructure is not in place to handle it. He said a plan needs accountability, and should have an implementation schedule. He said change is more than just increases or decreases in population – they involve changing demographics (changing age, race, etc.), among other things – and need to be reflected in the Plan. A Comprehensive Plan is mandated, but zoning is not unless a locality is covered under the Chesapeake Bay Act. One possible consequence to not having a plan is that localities could be in danger of losing pass-through funds from the federal government. Chandler noted that new legislation effective July 1 will require localities to factor in maintenance (“life-cycle”) costs into their Capital Improvement Plans.

April 27 – Local Perspectives

Tom Harris, Amelia County Administrator, discussed his role through the years in helping rural localities plan for growth. His prior work experience includes working as County Administrator in Northampton and King George Counties. In both cases, as is the case with Amelia, he faced the task of promoting economic development while preserving rural character. In Northampton and King George, the government worked in collaboration with citizens and divergent interests to develop a vision – which was carried out through a series of steps that included a strategic plan as well as tax and zoning policies conducive to that strategy. By working with citizens and having the political will to do what was needed, both counties are working toward their goals. Harris said, “If you don’t have the political will to stay the course, I don’t care what plan you have, it’s not going to work.”

RURAL GROWTH, from Page 2

Marvin Moss, a former member of the Fluvanna County Board of Supervisors, talked about what has been happening in his county. Fluvanna, located between Charlottesville and Richmond (I-64 crosses the northern part of the County), faces opportunities and challenges in managing growth. Among the issues faced by the County through the years: The County started growing in the 1980s (the population has doubled since 1990), but the County was not ready for it and had to play catch-up; Lake Monticello has not been integrated into the County; and the County has – in the past – not implemented its Comprehensive Plan (the land use map and zoning map did not match). Moss said that despite this, Fluvanna County remains largely rural and much of the County is undeveloped. He said citizens have expressed a desire to see the County remain rural, and the latest Comprehensive Plan – adopted in 2009 – “strongly” endorses this objective and lays the basis for achieving it. Among the challenges facing the County moving forward are to align government services to meet the needs of a growing and changing population, to implement the Comprehensive Plan and ensure development goes where it is wanted (not in areas the County wants protected), and providing infrastructure that ensures balanced economic growth and lowers dependence on property tax revenues.

Cassandra Stish, a member of the Buckingham County Planning Commission, addressed her County’s efforts to align its ordinances with the County’s Comprehensive Plan. Buckingham County adopted its most recent Plan in 2008 (the CRC assisted in the development of the Plan). The Plan’s main objectives include protecting rural character; limiting development to designated areas; limiting intensive development to areas with public utilities; protecting forestry, watershed, agricultural, and historic areas; and providing for economic growth to occur. Once the Plan was completed, the County faced the task of refining its ordinances. Part of that involved simplifying and streamlining use lists in the different districts so that the zoning was more in line with what was in the Comprehensive Plan. In some cases (“garden center” and “tree nursery,” for instance), similar uses were combined. In other cases, uses were moved from by-right to special use and (in rare cases) vice-versa. Some uses were moved out of certain districts altogether. Stish said it is important to get the local governing body involved in the process, and expects that it will take a lot of political will to make all of the needed changes. Engaging the Board of Supervisors allows for dialog and clarification on changes being suggested. In addition, it allows elected officials to see that changes in the ordinances are linked to language in the Comprehensive Plan. Stish urged those in attendance to stand by their Plans, refer to them, stick to them, and follow their process.