

Wednesday, 06 April 2016 15:16

Haywood residents favor land-use planning

Written by Becky Johnson



Haywood County residents support land-use planning by a large margin, according to the results of a recent telephone survey.

Two-thirds of those surveyed said they support a common plan for land-use and development, with only 20 percent saying they were opposed, and the remaining 14 percent undecided. The survey of 800 randomly selected residents was commissioned by the county and carried out by Western Carolina University Public Policy Institute.

"I think it is quite clear there is a desire for the county to engage in some planning," Haywood County Commissioner Mark Swanger said of the results.

Land-use planning comes in many flavors, however, and as to what direction the county might go, if any, is way too soon to say.

But Swanger is fairly confident there's one path land-use planning won't take: countywide zoning.

"I still think this is going to have to be from the grassroots level," Swanger said, citing a community-led a process.

Until recently, commissioners were operating under the assumption that land-use planning wasn't popular with the public. The idea hasn't been broached since the late 1990s, but the heated hearings and angry crowds who dominated the last debate still loomed large in local politicians' memories. They weren't eager to go down that path again.

Commissioners were forced to rethink that notion recently and postulate whether public opinion has shifted in the intervening two decades.

"People from both sides of the political spectrum, and for potentially different reasons, were asking for intervention from the county in the absence of a county land-use plan," Swanger said.

The final revelation for commissioners came this winter. A rural farming community repeatedly begged commissioners to stop a shooting range from encroaching on their tranquil quality of life, one they'd known for generations.

It was the third time in less than a year that public outcry had erupted in the county over the prospect of development deemed unsavory by a particular community. Land-use conflicts had also cropped up over a trash and recycling sorting center, a charter school campus and a dog-boarding kennel.

During the disparate debates, several members of the public urged commissioners to take a more proactive approach.

"Rather than reacting to each individual thing that happens, I think it is a good opportunity for communities in Haywood County to think about what do we want to see, what is the character we want to preserve," Susan Sachs, a Haywood resident, said at a county meeting in February.

Still, commissioners didn't know if the isolated NIMBY conflicts — an acronym for not-in-my-backyard — were indicative of larger public interest.

"Those very much in favor or very much opposed to something often end up dominating the conversation," Swanger said. "I wanted to know what the larger feeling was. I wanted to scientifically determine it."

Enter the WCU Public Policy Institute.

“Our goal, as it always is, was to help them get a more repetitive sample of opinions from the entire county,” said Todd Collins, the director of WCU’s Public Policy Institute. “That is the goal of taking surveys instead of town hall meetings, because it is not just who yells the loudest.”

Collins said the cold call from Haywood County officials asking for help measuring sentiment on a local issue is exactly the type of public service the Public Policy Institute hoped to offer in the region when it was created in 1999.

“They are just a wonderful asset to have,” Swanger said of the Public Policy Institute.

The survey reduces the guesswork that often goes into trying to assess the community’s wishes.

“It was a good barometer to get a measure of public opinion,” David Francis, the special projects coordinator for the county, said.

The telephone survey polled more than 800 randomly selected residents of Haywood County based on voter registration rolls, specifically those who have voted at least once in the last six years. Collins said he is confident that the results are a statistically accurate representation of the greater public. The survey cost the county \$6,000.

Collins said graduate students in the public affairs get valuable experience crafting a survey, carrying it out and analyzing the results.

“I think we fill a need in the community and can do it less expensively than a private consultant, but there is also the educational opportunity,” Collins said.

Collins said it is obviously up to commissioners what, if anything, they want to do with the survey now.

“If your goal is to create a policy, then you can look at these survey results and create a policy that follows the will of what people seem to want,” Collins said.

Commissioners have not decided exactly where to go from here. So they’ve passed the issue on to the planning board to consider.

“We asked them to basically formulate a game plan,” Swanger said. “We want them to brainstorm some and use their tools as a planning board to look at the results of the survey.”

Swanger suggested an analysis of what other counties in the region have and don’t have. Jackson County, for example, has small-area land-use plans for individual communities like Cullowhee and Cashiers, but nothing countywide. Macon County, meanwhile, has a high-impact use ordinance that stipulates where more intrusive types of development like factories, racetracks or landfills can go.

Haywood has a handful of piecemeal development regulations already on the books — including steep slope construction, trailer parks, strip clubs, junkyards and soon, outdoor commercial shooting ranges — but nothing akin to actual land-use planning.

“The county is getting the reputation of ‘Oh you can do whatever you want,’” Bruce Bowen complained during a county meeting in January about the shooting range coming to Francis Farm. “We don’t have proper zoning. We have to have guidelines for people to follow. It is important. You are talking about changing the nature of a community that goes back centuries.”

Survey says

A telephone poll of 800 randomly selected residents of Haywood County measured public opinion surrounding land-use planning.

- *66 percent agreed there should be a land use plan, 20 percent disagreed, and 14 percent were unsure.*
- *64 percent supported additional industrial land-use regulation, 24 percent opposed them, and 13 percent were unsure.*
- *50 percent supported additional commercial development regulations, 36 percent were opposed, and 12 percent were unsure.*
- *48 percent supporting additional residential land-use regulations, 40 percent opposed them, and 12 percent were unsure.*
- *When asked about the severity of land development as a problem, 39 percent said the problem is a major one, 35 percent think of it as a minor issue, 22 percent reported that it was not a problem and 4 percent were not sure*

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