

Whitman County Comprehensive Plan Update

Planning Commission and Virtual Public Meeting - Notes

Date: **Wednesday, March 10, 2021**

Location(s): Zoom

Time: **7:00 – 9:00p.m.**

Meeting Attendees:

| | Name | Association | Title |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| County Staff | Alan Thomson | Whitman County | County Planner |
| | Brandon Johnson | Whitman County | Administrative Supervisor |
| | Grace Di Biase | Whitman County | Assistant County Planner |
| | Mark Storey | Whitman County | Public Works Director/County Engineer |
| County Commissioners | Art Swannack | Whitman County | District 1 Commissioner |
| | Tom Handy | Whitman County | District 2 Commissioner |
| | Michael Largent | Whitman County | District 3 Commissioner |
| Planning Commission | Brian Davies | Pullman | Member |
| | Chad Whetzel | Rural Pullman | Chairman |
| | Dave Gibney | Pullman | Member |
| | Keith Paulson | Colfax | Member |
| | Hailey Wexler | Pullman | Member |
| | Erina Hammer | Farmington | Member |
| Organizations | Todd Hall | LDC, Inc. | Planning Manager |
| | Matt Covert | LDC, Inc. | Planner |
| | Samantha Adams | LDC, Inc. | Associate Planner |

Executive Summary:

The public meeting on March 10, 2021 provided the County and consulting staff with valuable and necessary information on some of the shared perspectives held by County residents. These shared perspectives will shape the visions of Whitman County, and eventually into specific goals and policies. Much of the conversation centered around cluster zoning and its inherent benefits, as well as challenges; the importance of preserving critical areas and natural resources; and how to, and where to, encourage diverse business development in the county. Below is a summary of the main conversations had, and a list of additional comments provided are listed as well.

Cluster zoning generally had support from the meeting attendees. In theory, cluster zoning is supported. In reality, the real estate market, water rights regulations and access make development in these areas particularly difficult. Since the cluster zones were created, three main areas have been bought out for development - along Sunshine Rd., Airport Rd., and Kitzmiller Rd. These areas were initially developed because of their proximity to roads and other amenities. There is less incentive to buy land where there are existing access issues that may require expansion of public road systems and additional work. The last major roadblock the success of cluster zoning is facing is water regulations dictated by the Department of Ecology (DOE). Cluster developments are limited to an exempt well status which will allow withdrawal of up to 5,000 gallons per day for each cluster of four buildable parcels. That means each of the four residences could only withdraw 1,250 gallons of water. Each cluster would also have to establish a public water system, a group B system, which is more expensive and more involved than a non-public system.

Based on the conversation around critical area and natural resource preservation, there seems to be mixed feelings about how these lands, specifically rock quarries, are managed in the county. Whitman County's perspective is that quarries are an absolute priority for the future development of transportation networks. Residents have expressed differing opinions about quarries and some feel that quarries can be a nuisance and decrease property values. County staff expressed the need for updated language in the Comprehensive Plan to explain that quarrying is an acceptable and necessary activity in County jurisdiction.

Business diversity and flexibility in the Whitman County agricultural district was also noted to be a priority by staff. Over the last 40 years, the Whitman County agricultural district has changed very little. County staff suggested changing permitted uses in these zones to allow for the development of different uses such as mini-storage or sports venues; these types of development would have little impact on surrounding agricultural land. Folks expressed that more residential opportunities around Garfield, Colton and Colfax may help the diversity of businesses in those areas. Similar to residential development, businesses in commercial and retail zones are also limited by water right regulations.

County staff and the consultant concluded the meeting by discussing the project schedule and the intent to have in-person meetings during the summer (July). The conversation of Comprehensive Plan update will include other topics such as parks and recreation, trail development, public services, transportation and more.

General Comments:

We have many multi-generational ranchers and farmers that want and need the next generation not only to work but to live affordably while working under the family farm/ranch.

In what ways has Whitman County changed over the last 40 years?

- We should look at Endicott and St. John as examples as to where residential development can be incentivized. As we move forward, housing and families should be encouraged to site around some of the smaller, unincorporated towns in the County. There is a hesitation towards County-wide

regulations because they will impact development greatly depending on what area of the county you are in. There is a benefit to incentivizing housing around already-established towns.

- The way our development regulations work in the county is one house per legal lot. As an observation, we have had a number of family farmers asking to build another house on the property. An accessory dwelling is limited to 1,200 square feet and two bedrooms and folks seem to be more interested in a full-size single family home. We should look into potentially changing the zoning regulation to allow 2 houses on a parcel of land.
- One way to go about providing development regulations for the County is to frame it as follows... "In the areas within x-number of miles from a 5,000 population, development regulations are XYZ... In areas within x-number of miles from a City or Town with population greater than 30,000, development regulations XYZ apply...."
- The reason so many families are moving to Oakesdale is because there is good transportation between other large cities, as well as the small-town environment.
- The efficiencies of the farmers have gotten better, which has resulted in lower population. Also taking better care of their land in terms of runoff, etc. We need to do what we can to better work together with the actual and/or perceived rural/urban divide.

Is there balance between agricultural, commercial, and residential interests? If not, what do you think can restore it?

- There are issues around quarries and their compatibility with surrounding uses, do we think there needs to be a greater buffer around earthworks uses?
- Quarries are natural resources that need protection.
- Identify existing quarry lands in the Comprehensive Plan and protect them. It's hard to identify potential quarry lands without the landowner selling, then investigating further.
- Are there any areas of quarries that are threatened by surrounding residential development? We need to identify those areas that need protecting and buffering. It is not that you cannot have housing nearby, but there needs to be an understanding you are next door to a natural resource area and loud area.
- The market will dictate whether or not housing will abut critical areas. If we regulate those lands and their buffers, we may make it too complicated for housing to develop.
- Finding and maintaining new quarries is difficult, which can inhibit the development of new transportation networks.
- There is a need for updated language in the Comprehensive Plan stating that quarrying is a necessary resource. There is an argument from the public that quarrying decreases their property value and it has a NIMBY ("not in my backyard") attitude. The public can argue that quarrying is against public interest and its health, welfare, and safety. We need to clarify that if you build out in the county, a landowner understands what type of uses could potentially neighbor the property.
- Rock resources and engineering design dictates quarry lifespan – typically between 20 – 30 years.
- The two natural resources of utmost importance are agricultural lands and quarry rock resource land.

How can we allow business flexibility in agricultural zones?

- What kind of business in agriculture zones are we talking about? There are permitted and conditional uses allowed and 40 years ago when the plan was written, the uses were almost strictly agricultural. Room for business diversity would be for industrial or commercial development.
- Landowners have to be available to sell land, and the market has to be willing to support business development. There are opportunities out now, but nobody is taking the opportunity.
- The well/water rights influence development of commercial, residential, and retail development. Businesses can move outside into unincorporated county and drill a private well. This sort of business development needs to be close to Cities and reliable transportation routes.
- Do we contain this development to incorporated areas?

- More residential opportunities around Garfield, Colton and Colfax may help the diversity of businesses.
- What are the areas of the plan that reduce the flexibility of business development? The code can be restrictive by not having many allowable uses in the agriculture zones. We may propose to change the zoning code to allow mini-storage in the agriculture zone.
- Expand on allowed uses so areas do not need to go through a zone change.
- Extend our perspective on the opportunities that can be placed in the agriculture zone that will not disrupt those land uses, such as sports venues, RV parks (must go through a conditional use, but that seems to be necessary for now).

What are your thoughts on cluster zoning? Should we keep it where it is, remove it, or expand it?

- There is an economic opportunity as a farmer to sell a portion of land for residential development.
- With a minimum requirement of 20 acre clusters, most commonly a cluster is platted at 4-6 acres. When this occurs, land has the potential to go unused or unproductive.
- Code gives a range of 0.5 acres – 4-6 acres for the landowner/entity to plat and sell. It was typical for people to sell 4 acre lots, opposed to smaller 0.5-1.0 acre lots.
- Development regulations could specify smaller acreage in cluster zones.
- Department of Ecology Water Rights Regulations limit an exempt well to 5,000 gallons per day. A cluster of 4 homes would share the 5,000 gallons. 1,250 gallons per day, per house.
- Public water system for four parcels, if shared by one well, agreement with local Health Office who regulates water. First 2 parcels in a plat can have an exempt well, but when the third lot joins, it becomes a Group B public water system.
- When you're dealing with a public water system, you're dealing with the State Health Department, opposed to the local Environmental Health Department.
- If you were to do four wells, Ecology would call that a project and limit each lot to 1,250 gallons per day.
- Cluster limits: The City of Pullman would rather not have the cluster zones near City UGA boundaries because it can complicate the City service limits, boundaries etc. The City of Pullman only agreed to the tax sharing area if cluster zones were not directly adjacent to City limits. The City does not want cluster zones within the established Urban Growth Area.
- The only way the County can facilitate economic development is having retail and residential in unincorporated cities.
- Why is the cluster zoning area undesirable? Market dictates the success of cluster zoning and the past few years, very few landowners are selling and developers buying. Access also plays a huge role in the success of cluster zoning being bought up for development.
- Sunshine Road, Airport Rd & Kitzmiller Rd were successful in the Cluster Zoning opportunity zoning.
- How does property tax revenue work in the tax sharing area? Retail and commercial revenues are split. Property tax is paid whether a resident is in City limits or County jurisdiction, road taxes are only taken from those residents in the County.
- Pullman UGA is advisory, not an obligation by the County to engage in.
- One of the things Whitman County Code does not have is development regulation like you would have in a City code. The lack of guidance makes residential, and the transfer from agricultural lands to residential, development difficult.