

## **County OK another step in the wrong direction**

By Melissa Rooney : Guest columnist

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I was deeply discouraged by the Durham Board of County Commissioners' Feb. 25 approval of Epcon's comprehensive plan amendment for the West Side of Farrington Road, which permits a residential density increase from four single-family homes per acre (RS-20) to as many as eight units per acre (PDR 4.5) in an area where rural farmland now exists.

The time for upholding Durham County's stated intentions and comprehensive plan has long passed, yet the county commissioners refuse to accept the fact that change must start somewhere.

I commend commissioners Ellen Reckhow and Becky Heron for their sincere concern for the long-term state of Durham County and their support of the comprehensive plan (which took tremendous effort and cooperation from all Durham citizens), as clearly evidenced by their intelligent discussion and their sole votes against this comprehensive plan amendment.

The other commissioners' supporting argument was that Epcon developers would provide water and sewer to this area, thus saving Durham taxpayers from having to do so. However, the residents moving into this higher density area are going to cost us much more in infrastructure than sewer and water lines would have, especially since the developers' promise of 90 percent senior housing is unlikely to be enforceable. Then again, the water and sewer connections will certainly increase the asking price of the surrounding farmland that, I presume, will soon be for sale.

As Commissioner Reckhow pointed out, and planning director Steve Medlin confirmed, rejection of this comprehensive plan amendment would result in a reduction of only five residential units. Yet the board has now cleared way for the slippery descent of this area from a density of four homes per acre to as many as eight units per acre, while requiring no truly committed language addressing concerns for greater Durham county (infrastructure, water conservation, environmental resources).

I find it hard to believe that, after all the work and money spent up to now, the Epcon Development team would give up their development plans (including providing water and sewer) for a mere five units. But, once again, our county commission does not have the courage to test those waters.

In addition, it is incomprehensible that, after more than a year in the working, the Epcon development team was unable to offer the "committed" elements discussed Monday night until after their most recent meeting with the planning department (and this after an additional two-cycle deferral). And these elements were still declared by several government officials and staff as not truly committed by language in the development plan, thus leaving open the possibility that they may never come to fruition anyway.

So once again, Durham is taking the developers at their word and hoping we don't get burned (something with which we haven't had much past success). Even if this development team is upstanding and their actions follow their spoken words (despite the looseness of their written ones), the reward of a plan amendment and subsequent rezoning without the demand for truly committed language continues a terrible precedent in Durham County.

If Durham were a person, they'd buy the first used car they see for the sticker price, without negotiation and certainly without any kind of warranty. No wonder Chapel Hill is driving a hybrid limo while we're still crawling along in a 20-year-old, gas-guzzling jalopy.

It is no surprise that the Planning Department and Planning Commission both, recommended denial for this plan amendment, which begs the recurring question: What's the point of development review by the Planning Dept and Planning Commission when their requests for denial can be so completely ignored?

Before the Board of County Commissioners approves rezoning for this area (deferred until their next meeting), they should at least require truly committed language on all elements, including buffering and preservation of existing mature trees and vegetation, rather than the current plan to clear-cut, mass-grade, and plant lower-density saplings that require more water, and even then often die with no replacement and no repercussions.

At the very least, I hope that all commissioners will remember their discussion Monday night, and in line with that, prevent the new density of this parcel from being used by future developments to increase the gross residential density throughout this area.

And I hope that all Durham citizens will remember the way the BOCC voted on this issue when we vote, ourselves, in the upcoming elections.

*The writer is a resident of Durham.*