

Streamlining Must Not Prohibit Input From Residents

The Raleigh News and Observer (Editorial/Opinion, 6 Dec 2008).

I was heartened by the N&O article (Durham Reorganization, 20 Nov), in which City Manager Tom Bonfield recognized Durham departments' need for communication and collaboration. I hope our new sustainability coordinator, Tobin Freid, is included in this re-org, as our environmental resources are of increasing concern.

However, the last sentence lists one of Mr. Bonfield's top priorities: 'streamlining procedures for development review so that the city does not impede economic progress.'

Such streamlining has been discussed by Durham government for years now. And it's a sore subject with citizens.

In May 2008, council discussed streamlining development by 1) speeding up Annexation, essentially skipping review by the County, 2) restricting the planning commission's ability to defer cases, which is often the only thing that gets developers talking to neighbors in the first place, and 3) administrative approval of water and sewer extension agreements, when the city council's consideration of this issue is what forced Jordan at Southpoint to truly abide by conservation subdivision requirements back in December, 2007. We are lucky that council still has the authority to review permits for floodplain filling, as evidenced by their lengthy discussion of Southpoint Professional Center's application for floodplain fill last month.

Durham citizens rightfully fear that 'streamlining' is another word for rubber stamping developers' projects with minimal public feedback.

If streamlining is needed, then it should be on the part of developers not citizens. Right now, when development meets citizen opposition to rezoning and comprehensive plan amendments, they may actually request deferrals, presumably in the hopes of wearing citizens down ("Rezoning request for proposed subdivision withdrawn," News & Observer, 12 May 2007).

So we could start by permitting only regularly scheduled, simultaneous rezoning and comprehensive plan amendment hearings (1-4 times per year). This would also facilitate consideration of all of the surrounding land in question, not just the few acres requested for a particular development.

Still, one must wonder how urgent is the need for streamlining for the sake of economic progress. South Durham retail areas are being vacated indefinitely (Pier One Kids, Linens and Things), and land has been clear-cut, paved, and even built upon, only to sit empty, like the stores beside the new Harris Teeter at 54 and 751. And the economic situation isn't expected to get any better in the near future.

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