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How to preserve our rural countryside

By Ellen Nutter

When you ask people what they love about Wicomico County, farmland and a rural lifestyle are at the top of the list. These are the qualities people want preserved for themselves, for their children, and for their children's children.

What does successfully preserved agriculture and rural countryside look like? Importantly, there are large contiguous areas of farming. Stream valleys, wetlands and woodlands are left in their natural state. Houses are few, confined mostly to farmsteads and small hamlets.

How are we doing at achieving our rural vision? Not very well.

Even though the county is an agricultural powerhouse, with much of our economy dependent on the poultry industry, we are allowing our countryside to be developed at an unprecedented rate. Wicomico County's rural zoning is among the most permissive in the state. Since 2000, more than 80 percent of the subdivisions approved in rural Wicomico have been allowed a density bonus. This has permitted one house per three acres, or five times the development that would otherwise be allowed by the underlying zoning of one house per 15 acres.

By contrast, Kent County's rural zoning allows only one house per 30 acres; Talbot and Caroline allow one per 20 acres. Worcester allows only five lots to be subdivided from parcels as they existed in the 1950s and '60s. The Maryland Department of Planning defines one unit per 20 acres as the minimum for conservation zoning. The department has warned Wicomico County that state funding for farmland preservation is in jeopardy unless zoning is changed to better preserve agricultural land and meet conservation goals.

On Oct. 17, the Rural Areas Planning Committee recommended to the Wicomico County Council that the density bonus be eliminated and that maximum lot sizes be limited to one or two acres. This would preclude the worst suburban sprawl. It should be approved as soon as possible, to prevent applications coming in under the old regulation.

Unfortunately, the above measures will not be enough. The Rural Areas Planning Committee recommends additional provisions, but there is a lack of consensus about their efficacy.

The county is now beginning preparation of a comprehensive plan, which will guide its future growth and development. The plan will consider the many impacts on development: population growth, economic development, land capacity, environmentally sensitive areas, housing, schools, water and sewer resources, transportation and more. It will recommend implementing actions such as changes in zoning and subdivision regulations.

Preparation of the comprehensive plan is a public process and will be an excellent forum for the county to come to consensus on how development should occur.

Regarding rural development, the goal should be to insure contiguous large areas for farming and preservation of sensitive natural features, including wetlands, wooded areas, wildlife habitat, etc. Points to be considered in the comprehensive plan for rural areas include:

- Overall density should be no greater than one house per 20 to 30 acres. We should eliminate current "minor subdivision" provision, whereby land owners can create up to three lots with no Planning and Zoning Commission approvals required. Alternatively, zone lots in the rural area as farms, as is done in Worcester County, with no large subdivisions permitted.
 - Residential lots should be no larger than one acre, or two acres if required by the health department for septic system approval.
 - Residential lots should be clustered in one area of a subdivision, to provide the maximum contiguous area for agriculture, wildlife, wetland retention and other natural resources. Clustering should be mandatory, with no density bonus allowed.
 - A "green infrastructure" plan should be prepared, to map and identify areas which should be preserved for agriculture or to conserve sensitive natural features. This information would be used to help identify those lands that should be left in open space within subdivided parcels.
 - Subdivision approvals should expire after five years (or less). This will ensure that growth occurs under current regulations and that development responds to changing conditions in the surrounding area, and to infrastructure availability, school capacity, and the many other realities that affect the success of development.
 - Ellen Nutter is a community planner with 30 years experience as a consultant to municipalities on comprehensive planning, land development regulation and real estate development feasibility. She is a member of the board of the Wicomico Environmental Trust.
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