

## GROWTH: City is limited in its ability to manage growth

*Continued from page 1*

Sisters, looking to create and sustain a vibrant, diversified economy. With diversification, Sisters can better survive the ups and downs of a tourist-based economy when weather, forest fires, or an economic downturn reduces the number of visitors.

The majority of residents probably lie somewhere along the continuum from no growth to all-out expansion.

Sisters is almost universally regarded as a great place to live, surrounded on three sides by majestic national forestland, which offers multiple opportunities for outdoor adventures and recreation. The mountain scenery is breathtaking. The Western architecture creates a quaint and charming downtown.

Blue skies and warm sunshine lure visitors all summer long and into the shoulder seasons. The lack of big-city hustle-bustle is a welcome relief. People actually take time to talk to one another in the stores and restaurants. Local cultural events fill the calendar, with the Rodeo, Quilt Show, and Folk Festival bringing thousands of visitors to town. Some decide to stay.

Housing is at a premium, with high sales and rental prices on the few units that come on the market. Affordable housing has become the mantra for City planners and citizens wanting to buy or rent a home.

The very qualities that attract people to Sisters are also the qualities that some current residents are fearful of losing. Why is growth bad — or is it?

People talk about losing the quality of life as the population grows. Misley suggests

we examine what “quality of life” means. He pointed out that Sisters still doesn’t have a stoplight. We have a couple of grocery stores. There are no parking meters. What are people experiencing that is changing and impacting their quality of life? It may be different for different people.

In discussions with residents, Misley would like to hear specifics.

The average citizen has little understanding of state land-use laws and how they impact local decisions. Who’s really in charge of growth?

Misley offered, “It’s a fool’s effort to try to control growth.” He then added, “We (the City) really don’t have much control IF growth is going to happen. We do have some control over HOW it’s going to happen.”

Much of what the City can and cannot do to manage growth is regulated by state land-use laws, which were adopted in the 1970s to protect the state from urban sprawl. Under Oregon law, each of the state’s 241 cities and metro areas has created an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) around its perimeter — a land-use planning line to control urban expansion onto farm and forest lands.

Land inside the UGB supports urban services, schools, and fire and police protection. The boundary is one of the tools to protect farms and forests from urban sprawl and to promote the efficient use of land, public facilities, and services inside the boundary.

Without approval from the state, the UGB cannot be changed. And the state looks at whether all possibilities for growth within the UGB have been maximized by making changes to the zoning codes to allow for more density or taller building heights.

Misley pointed out that the state legislature has a tendency to write statewide

policies that are appropriate for large urban areas but not necessarily for small towns like Sisters with character, charm, and a sense of history. The state looks at our one-half acre lots and says those can be densified, which would change the character of the city.

The Community Development Department is currently in the middle of an extensive study mandated by the State of Oregon in order to update the City’s Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2005 and updated in 2012.

The Comprehensive Plan is intended to guide land-use planning in Sisters, based on the City’s vision for urban growth management. The recently completed Sisters Country Horizons Vision Project will inform the update as will the just-completed Housing Needs Analysis and Buildable Lands Inventory. All of these projects take extensive staff time and City resources.

Misley pointed out that in a small town like Sisters, jumping through state-mandated hoops is much more difficult than it is for a larger city with a generously staffed CDD department. Sisters has a three-person CDD staff to handle the day-to-day operations as well as the larger, long-term projects.

“We are always trying to stay one or two steps ahead... We are trying to be proactive (about growth) but end up being reactive,” Misley said. “We need to be thoughtful of the populace, but growth is not going to stop. We have a major east/west state highway going through our town. We have to work with ODOT on any matters dealing with that highway.

“We can’t tell land owners who hold property for investment purposes what they should do with their property,” Misley pointed out.

The City has to consider

potential land use versus the reality of what property is available and when.

Land-use planning is both an art and a science, according to Misley. Portland State University is the authoritative source for statewide population-growth projections on which land-use planning is based.

“There are wild cards that don’t figure into those projections, like a UGB expansion or annexation of new land,” added Misley. “Planning has to reflect reality.”

Unlike a number of other cities, Sisters doesn’t own large parcels of vacant land that they can offer for development or place in reserve for future development. The County has jurisdiction over any land outside the UGB.

The U.S. Forest Service regulates the uses of the national forests.

The City has its Comprehensive Plan, zoning, development codes, and ordinances to guide land use within the UGB. State law requires that proposed changes to local Comprehensive Plans, supporting documents such as Transportation System Plans, and implementing regulations be submitted to the State Department of Land Conservation and Development (DCLD) for review.

The management of growth is a complex, multi-layered process. That might give pause the next time someone says, “Why doesn’t the City just....”

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