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Planning for Sprawl

Staff study betrays bias for unbridled development

The Eugene City Council voted 6-2 Aug. 10 to move toward expanding the urban growth boundary (UGB) based on assumptions biased toward urban sprawl.

Councilors Andrea Ortiz, Alan Zelenka, Jennifer Solomon, George Poling, Mike Clark and Chris Pryor voted for the pro-sprawl motion. Councilors Betty Taylor and George Brown voted against it.

In 2007 developers, land speculators and their allies pushed a bill through the state Legislature requiring that Eugene complete a buildable lands study, a prelude to a UGB expansion, a decade earlier than otherwise required.

UGB expansions involve big stakes. Expansions can cost taxpayers hundreds of millions in new infrastructure and services, reduce quality of life, damage natural areas and increase global warming. But developers and land speculators can cash

per acre, for example. Staff assume that 55 percent of new housing will be detached single family homes. But in 2007 developers built far more densely with only 43 percent of housing in detached homes.

"We're estimating too high," said Councilor Zelenka of the number of acres staff say are needed. "The recent history is dramatically different."

• The nation is in the grips of the "Great Recession" and Oregon is among the worst hit, but city staff project employment growth of 1.4 percent per year. By comparison, Lane County had a 5.4 percent *drop* in employment in the last year, according to state data. The staff figure exceeds the city's estimated population growth of 0.9 percent per year, eventually creating impossible negative unemployment numbers unless there is a big increase in workers commuting to Eugene from other cities.

Councilor Brown said he'd like to see

The citizen advisory committee for the study 'was heavily weighted with development people.'

— COUNCILOR BETTY TAYLOR

in on a sometimes 10-fold increase in land values.

The council voted Aug. 10 on key assumptions for the complicated required study of the amount of land needed to accommodate growth during the next 20 years. Many of the assumptions, developed by city staff and the consultant they directed, appear to include big biases toward maximizing urban sprawl. Here are examples:

• The citizen advisory committee for the study "was heavily weighted with development people," Councilor Taylor said. Although surveys have repeatedly shown Eugene residents oppose expanding the UGB for urban sprawl, only two of the 16-member committee appointed by city staff have publicly taken that position. The committee includes many representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Home Builders Association, speculators, Association of Realtors and other advocates of sprawl.

Despite the clear numbers, Eugene Planning Director Lisa Gardner denied she had stacked the committee or that the heavy weight toward developers was indicative of her pro-sprawl bias. "It's fairly well rounded," she claimed of the 14-2 ratio. Gardner told Taylor she would not allow a minority report to the City Council from her department's committee.

• Contrary to development trends and adopted city policy, city staff assume that the city will grow less dense than it has in recent years. The staff assume an average residential density of 6.7 units per acre, but since 2000 the density trend is clearly higher. In 2007, developers built at 10 units

such a spectacular economic turn-around, but doesn't think it's realistic. "It's going to take us several years just to get back what we've lost," he said of the unemployment numbers.

• The staff also ignored the huge redevelopment potential of Eugene with pits and empty buildings downtown, a 200 acre rail yard, near-empty hospital buildings, a huge empty chip plant, and plans by School District 4J to sell off closed schools. Staff directed the consultant to not pursue a "supply side" approach of calculating maximum build-out based on zoning densities, and instead assumed a redevelopment rate less than half that of other cities in Oregon.

• Other assumptions inflating land need include ignoring the growth of employment in Springfield, the national trend away from low-density manufacturing, the trend toward working at home, UO plans to build 1,500 high-density dorm beds in the next decade, students sharing houses, adopted Growth Management Study and TransPlan policies requiring more density, and schools sharing fields as city parks.

City staff and their consultants say it looks like their final baseline report will say the city needs a UGB expansion for commercial and residential land. City staff said the council could revise the assumptions this fall and/or still avoid a UGB expansion by increasing density policies later, but whether that will actually happen remains unclear.

Zelenka says the baseline acreage number produced by staff will produce a lot of pressure to expand the UGB. "What prevents the baseline from becoming the one and only path forward?" **EW**

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