

Public Comment on behalf of the Orange County Comprehensive Plan Coalition

Good evening. My name is Allan Rosen and I am speaking on behalf of The Orange County Comprehensive Plan Coalition, which is made up of nine organizations representing diverse interests in Orange County. Just this month we marked our first anniversary.

The Coalition formed to pursue two goals. First, we've made every effort to inform the Planning Board of our shared priorities for environmental health, social equity, and economic vitality that we want to see incorporated in the Comprehensive Plan. You will find that the coalition has presented 21 pages of written comment¹ and coalition members have provided an additional 61 pages².

The Coalition will wait until the Planning Board makes its recommendations available to the public before making further comments on the plan. Since those recommendations are expected to be ready on September 22, I would like to highlight one concern: According to the timetable, the public will only have fifteen days to review the planning board's recommendations and, in turn, prepare any remarks they feel are warranted before the commissioners scheduled vote on October 7. **Hence, the Coalition recommends that the commissioner's vote takes place no sooner than 30 days after the Planning Board's recommendations are available for public review.**

However, it is to our second purpose – educating the public about, and encouraging their participation in, the comprehensive plan update process -- that prompts our remarks tonight. In furtherance of this goal we maintain a website, advocated for the January Public Input Session, written op-eds and letters to editors, set up displays at community events, presented at civic meetings, and posted on local blogs. Hopefully, these actions increased the level community participation.

Unfortunately we recently learned that the manner in which public comments are being reviewed is exclusionary and therefore contrary to the purpose of community participation. As noted in the coalition's memo found on page 187 of the Agenda Item Abstract,

"... Because time is of the essence, we commend staff for preparing a Table of Proposed Revisions (TPR), which includes public comments. This table will be very helpful in facilitating the Planning Board's review in a timely manner.

However, not all the public comments are being included in the TPR. Instead only those comments deemed as "not too controversial or are not significant changes to the meaning of the objective" are included. (*i.e. comments deemed "controversial" are being excluded!*)

¹ See pp. 22-23, 27-30, and 36-49 of the May 19 Public Hearing Agenda Item Abstract and p. 187 of the August 25 abstract.

² See pp. 32-35 of the May 19 abstract and pp. 89, 91-95, 119-132, 136, 142-165, and 167-178 of the August 25 abstract.

In contrast, the Coalition strongly recommends that all public comments received to date – and for as long as the Public Hearing is open – be included in the TPR. The Planning Board should solely be responsible for selecting which public comments to incorporate into their recommendations rather than for Planning Department personnel to filter the comments that will be considered. Such filtering could all too easily be mistaken as staff censorship and/or usurpation of the Planning Board’s role.”

Personally, I do not think the filtering is intentionally censorious, but rather the result of the work load and time constraints placed on the Planning Board and Staff. Whereas planning department staff unsuccessfully attempted – over a period of four years -- to update only the rural watershed, residentially-zoned sections of the county’s Land Use element, the Planning Board has the responsibility (supported by staff) to spearhead a complete update of the entire eight-element Comprehensive Plan in less than two years, while also conducting its regular business, reviewing the Buckhorn Village proposal and integrating eight county advisory boards into the plan update process. In this context, it’s not unexpected that a time-saving mechanism such as comment filtering was utilized.

Still, even if the filtering was done with the best of intentions, the effect is the same – some public comments both from the Coalition and all other concerned parties who took the time to engage in the process are not getting the full attention of the Planning Board during their meetings. Rather, as this process comes to a close some public comments, whether controversial and/or progressive and forward-thinking, will only be taken up by the Planning Board if an individual board member takes it upon his/herself to bring specific items to the board’s attention and advocate for changes to the Plan.

Therefore the Coalition strongly encourages the County Commissioners to make sure that

- 1. all public comments are treated equally in the review process,**
- 2. the Planning Board has sufficient time to accommodate an equitable review process, and**
- 3. the commissioners vote on the Comprehensive Plan takes place no sooner than 30 days after the Planning Board’s written recommendations are made available to the public.**

Any adverse consequences of extending the process to accommodate equitable public participation is small compared to the benefits, especially for a document intended to have such long-lasting influence.

Orange County Comprehensive Plan Coalition Member Organizations

Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce, Community Action Network, EmPOWERment, Inc.,
Foundation for a Sustainable Community, The Greater Chapel Hill Association of REALTORS,
Homebuilders’ Association of Durham, Orange and Chatham Counties, Inter-Faith Council on Social Service,
The Village Project, Walkable Hillsborough