

Frustration Over Planning Leaders Emerges

by KATIE DUNN, Staff Writer

Frustration and distrust about those chosen to lead a yearlong effort to update the county's comprehensive plan arose from some of those who attended an almost three-hour meeting at the county school system's Education Center.

Officials with Planning Works — the consulting firm assisting the county in its plan update — discussed the overall effort at Tuesday's meeting and asked attendees to provide input about the county's strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and successes.

But several of the more than 30 people who attended said they believed their ideas would not count. Some people also questioned whether individuals chosen to serve on 11 advisory committees were the best candidates to represent the county's interests.

Resident Bill Smith said the county has developed two classes of people: those selected by county leaders to "lead" and those either removed from these positions or barred from participating due to county leaders' decisions. The county has not fully taken advantage of the variety of skills, knowledge, and perspectives that its residents can offer. Smith added that county committees are often pre-selected to fit a certain vision. This is not an issue unique to Wise County, but the practice where people are selected to serve because they're "(a) convenient, (b) they're popular, or (c) they're who you want on the committee" needs to be addressed.

Planning Works' Bruce Peshoff told Smith that his concerns had been noted during focus group meetings earlier that day. The plan can't mandate or codify who is appointed to committees, but Peshoff said it can help foster more participation and coordination. The county has multiple tourism boards, for example, but Peshoff said they don't communicate and many don't hold open meetings that could foster more community involvement. The plan could help outline strategies to create more committees and meaningful committees that coordinate with other groups that have shared interests.

Wise resident Judy Pearce also voiced concerns about the advisory committees' membership. Chosen individuals seem to reflect "faces that look toward the past," some of whom were present when issues and concerns the county faces today were created. "I think there are some people in the room who when they look at the primary voices that are speaking to you as a consulting team, we perhaps see those as the voices of the past — and there were exceptions — but it is perhaps not the case that these are the most forward thinking people in the county."

Peshoff said the entire update is meant to be a public process, but this isn't the first time someone has called into doubt those chosen to represent a locality in an advisory capacity. He added that people can call County Deputy Zoning Administrator Cindy

Sorrels, also the plan update's project manager, or visit www.wisecounty.org/planupdate to provide input about the plan. If someone has a suggestion for another focus group, he also encouraged them to contact Sorrels. "We're not going to broad brush or gloss over the issues," said Peshoff. "We're going to present it all." He noted that in meetings earlier that day, he and Planning Works' Mike Chandler did not notice any indications that suggestions were being made with ulterior motives in mind.

Resident Jane Branham told Peshoff concerns about whether her input would be considered stemmed from past meetings where she had spoken, but her thoughts were never really heard.

Anyone who thinks something hasn't been accurately portrayed should speak up, encouraged Peshoff. "Our job is to be community group therapists," provide recommendations and options for the county and explain the implications of each so it can make informed decisions about goals and priorities.

Andrea Hicks, Spearhead Trails' marketing administrator, was also apprehensive about how the advisory committees had been chosen and the public's accessibility to these groups. Planning Commission Chairman Dick Houchins said county leaders were in no way trying to block anyone's input. If someone is interested in joining a committee, he encouraged them to contact Sorrels. "We had to start somewhere, and we're just getting started," he said.

Hicks said she was born and raised in the county, but moved away and only recently returned after a 20-year absence. As an outdoor recreation advocate, Hicks said she wanted to be part of the advisory committees rather than submit her thoughts through an intermediary. She also worried after listening to other people's comments that some individuals on the committees might not be the best candidates for the job. "I'm just hearing that there are a lot of things the county hasn't done in the past and if we have the same people in place, are we going to see any changes?" she asked. "Is this advisory board open enough to change, open enough to hear what we have to say for people who have a different perspective than old-time Wise County?"

Houchins responded that much of the conversation across various committees that day focused exactly on the concerns Hicks cited. "I can't guarantee what the document will look like at the end, but I can guarantee we will listen to everyone's input and we will do the best we can to formulate something that makes sense for the county."