

Wise County Launches Comprehensive Plan Update

by KATIE DUNN • Staff Writer

A list of perceived problems facing Wise County far exceeded a list boasting recent positive changes at a meeting Wednesday that officially launched the county's effort to update its comprehensive plan.

The two-hour meeting brought more than 30 county officials, business and community leaders for a brainstorming session about the 12-month process to revise and rewrite the plan.

Richmond-based Planning Works, LLC will consult the county throughout the process. Michael Chandler, a partner with the company, led Wednesday's session. Much of the meeting was spent discussing a comprehensive plan's purpose — it's a long-range guide for growth and development in a community — and the required steps for updating the current plan, which was adopted in October 1998.

Chandler told those gathered that the entire update will ideally finish by May or June 2015. Focus group meetings are set for next month — July 15 and 16 — to discuss potential elements for inclusion in the updated plan. A public meeting will also be held from 6-9 p.m. on July 15, and Chandler encouraged county residents to come share their thoughts about how to shape the county's future. He stressed the need to especially involve the county's youth. Helping the county's younger populace begin "thinking about what they like about the community," its potential weaknesses, and their hopes for the county 10 or 20 years from now is an important conversation, he said.

GOOD AND BAD

Chandler asked those gathered Wednesday to share their thoughts about recent positive changes the county has experienced, as well as changes that concern them.

Growth at the county's two colleges — University of Virginia's College at Wise and Mountain Empire Community College — an increased tax base thanks to Dominion's Virginia City power plant, consolidation of the county's six high schools, construction of new schools, and broadband Internet expansion were among the highlights.

The concerns involved few surprises. Attendees cited a declining population, especially the younger demographic, as worrisome. Chandler said this is why the county's youth must be involved in the plan update. He cited a comprehensive plan update he aided in Carroll County. High school juniors and seniors were interviewed as part of the update and asked whether they wanted to stay or leave the area. Chandler said many wanted to stay, but felt they had to leave for lack of good jobs.

Wayne Leftwich, a Wise County school board member and planning commission member, also noted a decline in the county's work force. Chandler said this should be a concern. If an industry is considering whether to move to the county, it will study the suitability and employability of the local work force.

A need to attract small industries, risks facing rural community hospitals, substance abuse problems, and a high number of disabled individuals were other concerns.

Chandler said the comprehensive plan can address these issues. The plan involves a community assessment of future land uses and its people, including the aspects — good and bad — that distinguishes it from other communities. Identifying these strengths and weaknesses will only help the county improve its future quality of life.

Also discussed Wednesday were important issues that will likely impact the county in future years. Finances and a declining coal industry were among the top concerns.

County Financial Administrator David Cox said coal has always been a blessing and he hoped it would remain a part of the local economy, but the county needs to embrace new ideas and industries, too.

St. Paul Mayor Kyle Fletcher also mentioned concerns about the loss of voting power that Southwest Virginia has experienced as its population has declined. The region's counties must now work together if they hope to accomplish anything at the state level, he said. More needs to be done to reach state legislators and capture investments for Southwest Virginia, which might help both the region and state prosper.

And there are abundant opportunities, noted county resident Roger Mullins. He recalled a recent visit from two Germans who toured the area and concluded that if the county pushed some things, especially recreational activities, it might create a nice place for people to visit.

Chandler agreed that the region's recreational opportunities are "practically endless." He noted these assets could potentially attract younger "millennials" who "are looking for an opportunity to get back to nature and enjoy life as opposed to being a slave to a job or house payment." A visit to this part of Virginia for many "would be . . . markedly different from what they see on a daily basis."

SYNCHRONIZED APPROACH

If new opportunities are to be explored and existing issues resolved, Camp Bethel Executive Director Jeff Rolen said, Wise Countians must rally. Decisions being made by the federal government are hurting the region, and its youth is leaving for better opportunities. "We need to try to be creative thinkers to bring our youth back," he said. The county must also take personal pride in "who we are and what we're doing. You can

do all the plans you want, but until you put some guts behind it, it's just going to be planning."

Wise County Schools' Superintendent Jeff Perry agreed with Rolen's assessment. "I think that underlies a lot of the problems (we have) when talking about drug abuse, unemployment, a lack of work force," he said. The county's communities must also stop the infighting if they hope to succeed, and it's partially community leaders' job to give residents hope and sell a particular vision.

"Unfortunately in the last couple of years, we have not sold a good model for people to follow," Perry admitted. "We have fought within the six communities that exist in our county. We've tried to win by destroying others. Our people have seen that and our young people say, 'we don't want any part of that.'"

Until the county stops this approach and develops a countywide focus, nothing will change, he said. "We have got to have a vision, the courage, the strength, the resolve to make that happen," Perry said. "We did a lot of things and there have been a million meetings and plans, and the problem is that it comes down to a handful of people who either make it work or don't make that work."

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