

Rogers C. Anderson
Williamson County Mayor




Planning Department
Michael Matteson, Director

WILLIAMSON COUNTY GOVERNMENT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Williamson County Board of Commissioners

CC: Rogers C. Anderson, County Mayor

FROM: Mike Matteson, AICP, Planning Director 

DATE: June 3, 2019

SUBJECT: Comprehensive Plan Update

As you know, the County is in the process of updating its Comprehensive Land Use Plan (Comp. Plan). We are roughly midway through this process, which we anticipate completing by the end of the year. As we are transitioning from the research/data gathering stage of this project into the stage where we identify and test various land use scenarios, we feel this is an appropriate time to provide an update to the County Commission. To that end, Mayor Anderson has asked Greg Dale (the lead consultant on the project) to address you at your June 10 meeting. Mr. Dale will give a brief PowerPoint presentation during Mayor Anderson's report, after which Mr. Dale and I will be available for any questions you may have.

This memorandum is intended to provide you with some key background information regarding this process in advance of your meeting.

Current Comprehensive Land Use Plan

The Comp. Plan is the County's chief policy document with respect to growth, development and preservation-related issues. The Plan articulates a vision for the future of the unincorporated County and includes specific goals and strategies geared toward achieving that vision. While the Comp. Plan addresses a range of topics, including public facilities, infrastructure, economic development, natural resources and housing, it is fundamentally a land use plan. As such, the primary purpose of the Plan is to recommend the type and intensity of development that should occur in various locations within the unincorporated County.

The County's current Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 2007 and was the culmination of 3-year process that included significant input and involvement from County residents and key stakeholders. During this extensive public input process, the most predominant sentiment expressed by citizens was the strong desire to preserve the rural character of the County. This sentiment was strongly reflected in the Comp. Plan document and was a prominent theme

throughout. In fact, the overarching land use recommendation of the Plan was to preserve rural character and to focus the majority of growth in designated areas around municipal boundaries (in the Urban Growth Boundaries), where adequate infrastructure can be more readily provided. Early in the process of developing the Plan, a number of ideas were explored, including the option of reducing allowable residential densities in order to achieve the vision of preserving rural character. This idea was included in the draft Plan policies. However, late in the planning process, a decision was made not to alter the allowable residential densities that have been in place for many years (generally 1 unit per acre in eastern areas and 1 unit per 5 acres in western areas). This decision was made as a result of opposition that was expressed by a number of large land owners who were concerned about the affect of reduced densities on land values. Therefore, the Plan recommended that rural character be preserved by other, less direct, means such as improved open space standards, better natural resource protection measures and an emphasis on Conservation Subdivisions.

After the Plan was adopted, it was the recipient of an "outstanding planning award" given by the Tennessee chapter of the American Planning Association.

The current Comp. Plan can be accessed at

<https://www.williamsoncountyttn.gov/113/Comprehensive-Plan>

Implementation Successes

Since the current Comp. Plan was adopted, there have been a number of successful efforts towards implementing the recommendations of the Plan. Those efforts include the following:

1. **New Zoning Ordinance**: Because the Plan itself does not "have teeth", it was critical to rewrite the County's Zoning Ordinance in order to help implement the goals and recommendations of the Plan. The Zoning Ordinance update was as significant of an undertaking as the creation of the Plan itself, as it was also a multi-year process that included numerous public input opportunities. This process resulted in a marked improvement in the quality of development standards, including, but not limited to, better open space and natural resource protection standards;
2. **Village Special Area Plans and Zoning Districts**: Per the recommendation of the Plan, the County created Special Area Plans for each of the four Villages identified in the Plan. These Villages include College Grove, Leiper's Fork, Grassland and Triune. Each of these individual planning efforts entailed working closely with residents, business owners and other community stakeholders over a period of 12-18 months to develop detailed plans for the future of these communities. These Special Area Plans were all very well received by the respective communities. Following the adoption of the Plans, The County worked again with the respective communities to create a set of tailored zoning district standards (standards for the Triune community are currently in development) to help implement the goals and policies of the Plans.

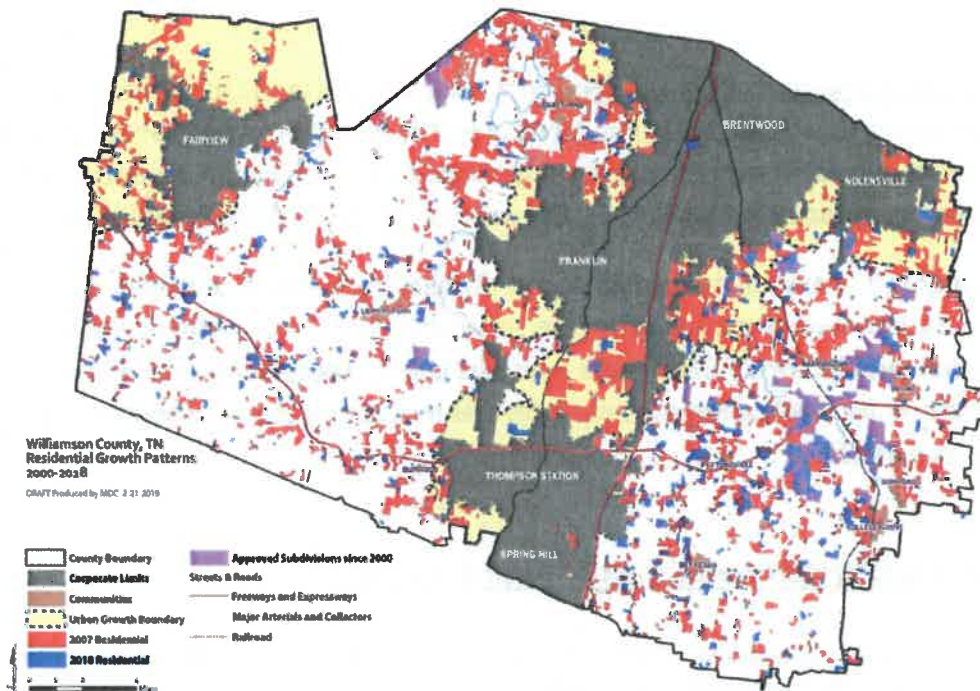
3. **Strong, Fiscally Responsible Public Facilities:** As called for in the Plan, the County has continued to do a good job of providing strong public facilities in a fiscally responsible manner. Examples include parks, emergency management and school facilities, the latter of which has been recently aided by the adoption of the Educational Impact Fee.
4. **Strong Economy:** The Plan establishes a goal of fostering a growing and balanced economy. This goal has certainly been met, as Williamson County enjoys one of the strongest economies in the Country and individuals and corporations continue to flock to the County due to its outstanding schools, favorable business climate and extremely desirable quality of life.

Implementation Challenges and Contributing Factors

While there have been many successes in the effort to implement the recommendations of the Comp. Plan, there have also been significant challenges and impediments. In fact, it can be argued that implementation of the overarching Plan policy - to preserve rural character in outlying areas and focus the majority of growth in and around the municipalities - has only been marginally successful. This lack of success in implementing this key recommendation can be attributed to a number of factors, but the two primary factors are:

1. The decision not to alter the allowable residential densities in rural areas, particularly in the eastern portion of the County; and
2. Changes in annexation law that have greatly diminished the ability for the municipalities to grow in a logical, orderly fashion.

The result of these factors has been that a significantly larger amount of development has occurred in rural areas of the County than has taken place within the urban growth boundaries, where development is most appropriate. The map on the following page illustrates how development since 2007 (shown in the blue and purple shades) has "leapfrogged" over the Urban Growth Boundaries (shown in yellow) into the rural areas.



Population Projections

The map above illustrates a concerning trend, particularly in light of the continued high demand for development in Williamson County. According to the Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization’s (MPO’s) population projections, approximately 350,000 additional residents are forecasted to reside in Williamson County by the year 2040, roughly 35% of which (124,000) are predicted to reside in unincorporated areas. While the MPO’s population forecast is a high-end projection, the fact remains that Williamson County is expected to receive a staggering amount of growth between now and 2040. However, it is important to note that the MPO’s figures are based on market demand and existing development policies. This is not an inevitable future, and these population projections simply underscore the importance of updating the County’s Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

Traffic Concerns

As a result of the rapid population and employment growth that has taken place in Williamson County and the region, traffic has become an increasingly pressing concern for residents as well as elected and appointed officials. While the growth has been primarily occurring in the cities, and while traffic issues are most pronounced in incorporated areas, many roadways in the unincorporated County are also experiencing increased traffic volumes and congestion as a result of the growth that is taking place, both regionally as well as in the unincorporated areas of the County. Citizens and County officials have become increasingly concerned about the impact that traffic congestion is having, or will have in the future, on the quality of life of area residents.

In response to those concerns, the County developed a “Comprehensive Traffic Strategy” to evaluate current traffic conditions, project future traffic conditions, and develop a set of

recommended strategies geared toward putting the proper systems in place to manage traffic in the most effective way possible.

One of the key recommendations of that effort is to update the County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan, with a specific focus on whether the densities in the one unit-per acre zoning districts should be altered as a way of not only addressing quality of life issues, but also to alleviate future traffic problems and their associated funding concerns. The Comprehensive Traffic Strategy Report can be accessed at <http://www.williamsoncounty-tn.gov/1664/Comprehensive-Traffic-Strategy>

Comprehensive Plan Update Project Currently Underway

The current effort to update the County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan began in the fall of 2018 after the County hired McBride Dale Clarion (the same firm that developed the current plan) to work on this effort. The consultant team also includes KCI Technologies and TischlerBise, Inc. to work on transportation and fiscal components associated with the Plan.

A Citizens Advisory Committee, comprised of elected officials, appointed officials, and other stakeholder groups, has been assembled to assist with this effort. County Commission representatives on this committee include Commissioners Lawrence, Lothers and Williams.

Progress to date

A number of steps have taken place thus far in the process. Those steps include the following:

1. Initial interviews with various appointed and elected officials and representatives of key stakeholder groups, including the development community, environmental interests, and county residents;
2. Discussions with Planning Directors from the six municipalities regarding planning issues and opportunities for collaboration;
3. Development of a website dedicated to the Plan, which is populated with a variety of information about the planning process. That website can be accessed at www.williamson2040.org;
4. The development of online surveys and other engagement exercises that have been posted on the website. In total, approximately 600 responses to survey questions have been received;
5. An assessment of the successes and challenges of the current Plan was developed;
6. Significant research, analysis and base-mapping has occurred in order to set the stage for future stages of the project; and
7. A public meeting was held in mid-April. This meeting was attended by more than 100 people.

Public Sentiment Received

As with the current Comprehensive Plan, public participation is a key component to this update process. To date, hundreds of citizens have participated through a combination of online engagement opportunities as well as a public meeting that took place in mid-April. Various exercises and surveys have been developed to solicit feedback from citizens about how what they value about the County and what they would like to see in the future.

The primary theme of the feedback received from citizens thus far is a common desire to preserve the rural characteristics of Williamson County that make it special, and that 1 unit-per-acre zoning is not “rural”. This sentiment largely mirrors that received during the 2007 Comp. Plan process, although it has been voiced even more strongly this time around. Responses to survey information can be viewed on the Comprehensive Plan website.

Next Steps

Based on feedback received from the Citizens Advisory Committee and from the public (and that received from Commission members at your June 10 meeting), the consultant team will develop a couple of different land use scenarios involving alternative development patterns and residential densities. These scenarios will then be evaluated according three key criteria. Those criteria are:

1. How well each scenario adheres to the community character ideals as expressed by County residents;
2. How each scenario performs in terms of its impact on the roadway network and the need for roadway improvements; and
3. How each scenario performs from an overall fiscal impact standpoint for the County.

Conclusion

Due to the factors described above, this update to the Comprehensive Land Use Plan is of utmost importance and comes at a pivotal time for the future of the County. It is crucially important that the Plan reflects the values of County residents and results in land use/development policies that allow the County to continue to grow, but in such a way as to preserve what makes Williamson County such an attractive place to live and work. In addition to addressing residential densities in rural areas, there will be a need to explore overall improvements to the growth management tools available for use by the County as well as the cities. Therefore, the Plan will provide recommendations regarding how the County and the cities can best collaborate on development issues within the Urban Growth Boundaries, infrastructure issues, open space planning and other more regional approaches.

We appreciate the opportunity to update you regarding this important project and we look forward to hearing your thoughts and comments.