



Many oppose revised ordinance Residents want communities to remain compact

Originally published in:

The Herald-Sun

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

Edition: Final

Page: C5

BY KARA EIDE chh@heraldsun.com; 918-1035

PITTSBORO -- Dozens of Chatham County residents fervently expressed their concerns about land development at a public hearing Tuesday night on the most recent draft of the compact communities ordinance.

Although still undergoing the review process, the ordinance is designed to regulate high-density developments with size limits and other requirements, as well as address issues such as design and buffering, wastewater management, affordable housing, schools and economic effects associated with large-scale mixed-use developments.

Of the nearly 200 people who filled the Chatham County Court-house in Pittsboro, almost all of those who spoke before the Chatham County Commissioners were against the loosened restrictions in the ordinance's current draft. The ordinance, which has been in the making for two years, has been revised multiple times since it was first published in November.

Patrick Barnes, who spoke on behalf of Chatham County United, an organization initially formed to fight annexation by Cary, said the overwhelming majority of people were in favor of the original, stricter version of the ordinance -- "the one with teeth," he said.

And at press time, after nearly three hours of public input, still more people who had signed up to speak were waiting, while others who had signed up donated their allotted three minutes to those with prepared speeches.

The concerns ranged from increased traffic to predicted financial strains, and many of the residents pleaded with the commissioners to make sure growth in the rural county remains controlled and gradual.

"Commissioners, if you want to learn to swim, you start in the shallow end. You don't go off the high dive," said Barbara Ford, a Chatham resident who expressed her concern about the effect that growth would have on schools.

And Rita Spina, representing the group Chatham Citizens for Effective Communities (CCEC), which has led the fight for a compact-community ordinance, told the commissioners: "Your responsibility is to look at these details in the light of how it will affect every citizen in Chatham County."

Meanwhile, Tony Tucker, president of Chatham County Economic Development Corp., and one of the only people to urge support for the ordinance in its current format, told commissioners that his board thought the original document was "un-doable." He urged the board to pass the current draft.

Later, in an interview, Tucker added: "In my opinion, what people really want is no growth. Period. And that's just not going to happen."

Many other speakers addressed the board on behalf of CCEC, representatives of which handed out a list of the eight biggest problems the group has with the current ordinance. The foremost item, and the one that seemed to most affect the other seven, was the maximum size that would be allowed for a compact community.

The county's current draft sets a limit of 2,500 homes, but many of the residents demanded that the commissioners reduce that to the original 1,500-home recommendation.

"The bulk of the issues of concern are related to size," CCEC board member Loyse Hurley told the commissioners. "We request that you reduce the size of the limitation."

But CCEC's biggest issue was with the waiver provision -- the short and final section of the ordinance that allows for the possibility that "the requirements of this ordinance may be adjusted, modified, reduced or waived" based on a reasonable standard.

Many residents spoke passionately against the proposed waiver, saying it defeats the purpose of the entire ordinance, taking matters out of the hands of the public and providing a way out for developers who want to avoid the rules.

"It makes no sense for the board to include a waiver provision that gives no real legal benefit and undermines the predictability of the law," said Roland McReynolds, a Chatham lawyer and CCEC board member.

CCEC Executive Director Gary Simpson later added that the money pouring into county coffers from developers might be "good news for the select few, but it's really bad news for all the rest of us."

"The county will not reap the economic reward it thinks it will," he said.