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Greenville residents raise alarm again over development near Riverheads High School

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VERONA — At the beginning of Tuesday night's Augusta County planning commission meeting, chairwoman Carolyn Bragg informed the audience that one of the night's planned public hearings had been deferred for 60 days and would not be taking place.

No one budged an inch. Dozens of Greenville residents had planned on attending the meeting for that specific hearing on a proposed rezoning that could lead to a large warehouse and distribution center on U.S. 11 near Riverheads High School. They'd found out the hearing had been deferred on Monday, but still wanted to make their voices heard.

Their reasons? Traffic and an alleged phone call where the applicant cursed out a former supervisor and local historian.

If this is all familiar, it's because this isn't the first time that residents have sounded the alarm on this development. Back in October 2022, a rezoning request was withdrawn by Augusta County Company, LLC that would have opened the door for a one-million-square-foot warehouse and distribution center, along with some smaller industrial buildings. Now, a different version of the request is back, but many of the issues that residents and county staff have with the development remain the same.

What's different this time?

Rather than requesting to rezone a 109-acre tract of land to general industrial, this time the request is to rezone approximately 48 acres of land near Riverheads High School on U.S. 11 from general agriculture to general business.

The land lays just south of the intersection of U.S. 11 and U.S. 340 in Greenville, and is approximately half a mile away from the Riverheads' school campus that houses both a high school and elementary school. A middle school is also on the way to the area in fall 2024.

What does county staff have to say this time around?

Just like back in October, county staff pointed out a few issues with development in that area, several of which remain from the October version of the application.

- Issues with the area's landscape, including numerous rock outcroppings. Staff recommended that a full geotechnical study of the project area be done prior to any development.
- Public water and sewage is available to the land, but upgrades would be required to make sure that the system is capable of meeting the needs of the proposed warehouse and distribution center.
- Part of the land is in floodplains, requiring extra attention to the elevation. The concept for the area also includes a stormwater management facility in an area designated as a floodplain, which would be prohibited.
- There is a list of items that need to be addressed on the access road before it will be accepted into the state system.

A major change from county staff's perspective was the compliance of the application with Augusta County's comprehensive plan and future land use map. The location is zoned for future use as business and lies within an Urban Service Area, making the request fit within the plan devised by the county. However, that did come with an admission that the request would make the area less compatible with the surrounding agriculture zoning. Within the comprehensive plan, the request does meet some plans related to placement of distribution centers within the county, but also works against the goals of safe roadways and conforming development in villages like Greenville to the established pattern.

Staff also brought about a point that has been a major contention of residents in Greenville, which would be the effect on traffic from the distribution center. Staff cited Virginia Department of Transportation statistics which pointed out one fatality and seven collisions resulting in injury on that stretch of U.S. 11 since 2015. Those traffic concerns and the associated safety issues were the main reasons cited for staff's recommendation to deny the request.

What did residents have to say?

By and large, Greenville residents were primarily concerned with the traffic generation in an area they feel already experiences high traffic. That concern was also near the top of the list back in October.

Joseph Williams also spoke about the effect of the already existing truck traffic on his businesses, where trucks miss their exit and then end up on Kerry Lane. Williams says he's down there six to seven days a week dealing with the trucks.

"15-20 of them a day come down there to make turns," said Williams, adding, "But before they can make a turn to Kerry Lane, they first choose to make a U-turn in front of Riverheads High School."

Residents told stories of watching semi-trucks miss exits and end up blocking traffic, including one truck that tried to perform a U-turn and ended up blocking traffic right near the Riverheads schools. A parent took it upon themselves to get out of their car and direct traffic until authorities could arrive, according to resident Dianne Moody.

"That situation happens weekly because they cannot read one of 18 signs that the state has probably paid for with our tax dollars directing them which way to go to the truck stop," Moody said.

Riverheads volunteer fire chief Barry Lotts also spoke out about the traffic issues on U.S. 11 and also on U.S. 340, and how that road is being worn out by trucks coming through that area to get to the truck stops at the intersection. He also mentioned that it was difficult for the fire service to get through the area, as the trucks pay little attention to the lights and sirens.

Rather than just voice concerns on traffic, however, this time residents also wanted to iterate that they were not "anti-development." Nancy Sorrells, a resident of the Riverheads district and former supervisor, spoke about a community-involved small area plan to direct development for the future. Moody suggested a task force to give input on businesses that would fit into the community.

"Please, for the sake of our community and our schools, put an immediate moratorium on any rezoning, or recommended from [the planning commission], from the schools to the village until we have such a plan in place as was called for in the comp plan in 2006," Sorrells said.

The idea of that plan would be to lay out what kind of developments could occur in the area that would be acceptable for the community, and would hopefully address current and future traffic issues. Sorrells also presented a petition with over 500 signatures in paper and online from the community against the rezoning.

Sorrells also referenced a conversation she had with the applicant, John Rasnick. In a phone call late February, Sorrells reached out to Rasnick to talk about the rezoning and the community's concerns. On that call, Rasnick allegedly accused Sorrells of being paid off and trying to stop him from making money on his property. Rasnick used profanity and misogynistic comments throughout the call, per a written statement from Sorrells.

The News Leader reached out to Rasnick for comment but has not received a reply.

“What he said to Ms. Sorrells, no woman should ever have to listen to,” Moody said during her comments.

What comes next for this process?

As mentioned above, the public hearing on the rezoning request was deferred for 60 days. According to director of community development Doug Wolfe, the conversation around the deferral dealt with the applicant wanting to look more into the traffic issues that have been raised by the community. A date is not yet readily available, and a public hearing will not be scheduled unless the applicant requests it.

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