

January 10, 2024

Dear Growth Plan Committee members,

I have been thinking a lot about how our local area planning impacts our feeling of community.

Today we **intentionally designate areas for development** – like highway corridors, town centers, commercial nodes, business parks. We do this for orderly development, but another important reason we plan and designate entire *areas* instead of individual parcels, is that similar uses feed off of and build off of each other. Designating a mixed-use node, or town center, attracts not just one project, but several projects. They build off of each other, complement each other, and eventually create a small (or large!) community. Downtown Knoxville would not have revitalized and flourished if only a block was designated downtown and the rest was designated shopping center or suburban residential.

**We need to do the same, and intentionally designate entire areas for agriculture, open space or natural areas.** Areas for farming and open space should have underlying characteristics that make them ideal for that, particularly soil types, sensitive environmental habitats, scenic qualities. In Knox County, those places are located both inside the current Planned Growth, the proposed Planned Growth Expansion, and the Rural Area. These are some of the very best places remaining for agriculture, natural areas and open space in the county. To help them be a community - to build on each other - I think we need to intentionally designate them as Rural Areas. Because once it's developed, we lose that farmland or open space forever.

Farmers need other farmers as neighbors, to build a community. Farmers help their neighbors out all the time, and farmers in proximity to farmers build a stronger farming community. And, the best neighbor for a farm is another farm or open space. Residential or commercial uses simply clash; kids cut fences and let livestock out, or neighbors think it's OK to go 4-wheeling on that open land. Or the next-door residents complain of livestock smells or noise from tractors working long hours to get up a crop of hay. The best neighbor for a farm is another farm.

Similarly, natural areas and open space near each other complement each other. A local example is House Mountain, which is complemented by the views of farms and rivers surrounding it. This contrasts with Sharps Ridge, an urban ridge with adjacent urban development that has a very different character. They both are great parks and serve the community, but they have very different characters because of adjacent land uses. If we don't intentionally plan for land use around our areas with scenic qualities, then the unsaid policy is that we are OK with it morphing into an urban environment.

This need for designating **areas** for ag, open space and natural area was driven home by an article in the Orlando Sentinel about the Orlando Airport. Years ago they built a 3rd runway and destroyed 320 acres of wetlands, and agreed to protect over 1,000 acres from future development. Today the airport authority is trying to remove a conservation arrangement for wetlands. From the [Dec 10th 2023 Orlando Sentinel](#):

When Orlando International Airport built the fourth of its four runways three decades ago, it obliterated the flora and fauna of 300 acres of prime Bull Slough Wetlands. To get permission to do that, the airport agreed to repair and protect thousands of wetland and forested acres elsewhere and indefinitely.

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Today, however, the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority is seeking to back out of its commitment to a big chunk of those long-protected acres that includes a lake – Mud Lake – at the airport’s south end.

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The airport authority also claims that Mud Lake and its wetlands have been spoiled by the region’s development. ‘Mud Lake will continue to become more isolated in the landscape reducing the wildlife connectivity and ecological function,’ Thibault [airport CEO] said.

Florida developers commonly argue for destruction of an environmental property by claiming that encroaching construction or agriculture already has wrecked its natural qualities. Noting the “regional context” of Mud Lake has changed, Thibault said the “City of Orlando is under increasing pressure for more developable land (and tax base), especially in close proximity to major employers and existing infrastructure such as the airport.”

So what can we do? Considering agriculture, forest and open space and natural areas as areas instead of individual parcels is a good start. It’s inconvenient that some of these areas are in the current or proposed Planned Growth Area. But for any of you who have attended an event out at the Strong Stock Farm (located in the current Planned Growth Area), a gem that provides a tangible connection to our landscape and the last 200 years of agricultural heritage - would good planning be to build suburban residential next door, or by developing across the river?

The scenic qualities of east Tennessee - often referred to as “God’s Country” by my friends who don’t live here - are why many of us choose to live here, raise families, own and run businesses from here, and invest here. Our mid-sized city of Knoxville, relatively compact and close to outdoor recreation, mountains, rivers, and farms that supply our local markets and restaurants - that differentiates us from Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham. We used to have affordability that differentiated us, but due to national trends we no longer enjoy that. We are asking that we keep, nurture and enjoy what does make our county special.

I urge you to look at the proposed Growth Plan Map. Ask yourself - are there important *areas* of open space, farmland, forestry or areas with scenic qualities that we are proposing to place in the Planned Growth Area? Should they be designated Rural Area?

Sincerely,

--Kevin

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