

Sierra Club Comments on The Knox County Unified Development Code

The Sierra Club appreciates the opportunity to weigh in on the development of a unified ordinance that will completely update the Knox County Zoning Ordinance that was first drafted in the late 60s and early 70s. We have more people now who have to live closer to each other than our 1970 vintage zoning ordinance anticipated. Current development regulations set a very low bar for development in Knox County. A developer can acquire a lot and get approval to clear every living tree and grass off of it, grade it, build houses, not plant a single tree, and claim that the required detention pond provides “common area”. And the current regulations do not reflect either a holistic vision for the future of the county nor an acknowledgment of the geographic, geological, cultural or ecological realities of the county.

We hope the new Unified Development Ordinance takes cognizance of the above factors and does not simply reflect the desires of real estate developers for easy acquisition of profitable properties.

The Sierra Club does not have the expertise nor capacity to provide detailed suggestions on a parcel-by-parcel basis for design standards or zoning designations. What we hope the new ordinance will do is build on a foundation that reflects the comments we made last year on the Knox County Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan. The paragraphs below paraphrase those comments.

1. The ordinance should factor in transportation needs, capacities, and limitations over the next 20 years. The history of efforts to accommodate and manage transportation and traffic in Knox County should make clear that transportation planning and management to alleviate congestion by widening roads and/or building new roads does not work. Yet the Knox County Comprehensive Plan assumes we will continue with the paradigm of individual vehicle transportation, which translates to ever-increasing vehicle miles traveled, ever-increasing commuter travel times, ever-increasing congestion and delays, and ever-increasing vehicle accidents. A comparison of this paradigm with other urban areas which have changed the focus from moving vehicles to moving people shows significant increases in quality of life for residents as well as decreases in the costs of health care, insurance, and infrastructure maintenance. The Plan should be looking at the distribution of development zones and place types with the incorporation of practical public transit options. Knox County's future transportation issues cannot be solved by the Plan's assumptions of continued reliance of more and wider roads and the addition of more greenways and sidewalks.

Any realistic development ordinance needs to account for the impacts of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, which are primarily caused by the transportation sector. The ordinance should guide growth toward the development of self-sustaining clusters corresponding to the town center concept that provide housing, employment, shopping, and recreation within walking distance of the residents, and not toward continued urban, suburban, and rural sprawl.

2. We disagree with the fundamental premise of the suitability analysis underlying the allocation of development zones and place types. The Plan states, "Suitability analysis determines the relative attractiveness of land for development." We believe suitability analysis should determine the

social and environmental value of land and its natural resources to the community as it is, compared to its social and environmental value under some future development. The relative attractiveness of land for development is primarily based on its purchase cost, its topography, its cost to clear, and its proximity to infrastructure. Those attributes have nothing to do with the actual value of the land to society.

We propose that the following standards and actions be incorporated before areas and locations are designated for development:

- Create design standards that encourage connection of natural areas to provide an ecological framework and promote migration for wildlife. Development plan review and approvals should look for opportunities to connect open space and natural habitats across developments and consider threatened and endangered wildlife species and wildlife corridors.
- Focus growth on self-sufficient hubs near existing infrastructure. We desire a combination of infill and more compact and mixed development along existing major corridors.
- Today we intentionally designate areas for development – like highway corridors, town centers, commercial nodes. The county should 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. Some of the very best places remaining for agriculture, natural areas and open space in the county need to be intentionally designated as Rural Areas.

Counties that have successfully slowed the development of rural land have implemented development densities of 1 house per many acres. In Tennessee, the most restrictive has been 1 dwelling unit per 5 acres in Williamson and Davidson Counties. Warren County, Virginia, has slowed development of valuable rural land by restricting density to 1 dwelling per 25 acres.

- Create a group of GIS layers that depict Environmentally Sensitive Areas including prime agricultural soil, historic resources, floodways & floodplains, Hillside / Ridgeline Protection Areas, rare and endangered species, protected areas, conservation areas, surface water, wetlands, and other pertinent features, and use these map layers when evaluating plan amendments, rezonings, and development plans.
- Create design standards for the Rural Place Types that protect and enhance existing rural heritage character defining elements such as fencing, street design, tree canopy, and built forms.
- Incorporate regulations in the Unified Development Ordinance according to or by guidance of the Hillside and Ridgeline Protection Plan. Enact an ordinance that specifically prohibits development of ridge-tops and slopes greater than 15%. For developments on slopes less than 15%, require exceptional standards for stormwater retention and release to prevent flooding and erosion.

