

Our Forum

Big picture must be considered on housing growth

Finally, perhaps, a breakthrough in town and county leadership's mindset on residential growth, this community's most pressing opportunity and challenge.

Jennifer Boykin, Isle of Wight County planning commissioner, said it well during a recent meeting where commissioners wisely tabled one in a long line of housing projects under construction or on the drawing board.

"I think we do our community a disservice when we look at each development application on its own and not all of the development applications that are out there or coming our way," she told colleagues.

Amen.

Smithfield Planning Commissioner Thomas Pope has tried to say the same over the past couple of years, most recently regarding schools when the Grange at 10Main was being debated. He asked about the cumulative effect of residential growth approved and proposed on schools, when others were hyperfocused on the impact of the Grange alone. We're not sure he ever got straight answers.

Anything less than complete support of every residential development proposed can get you ostracized by town leadership. As we learned during the Grange fiasco, if you express even one concern, Chairman Charles Bryan will tell the Town Council you're "not bold enough," and urge the council to ignore your recommendation.

Boykin, the county commissioner, is right. Appointed and elected leadership needs to hit the pause button on project approvals and take a comprehensive look at residential growth and its cumulative effects on this community. With so much housing in the pipeline, no single project can be considered in a vacuum.

Rather than approving random roundabouts to serve specific subdivisions, leadership must assess what road infrastructure improvements are needed to handle all of the coming growth. Then make a master roads plan. Same for schools, law enforcement and sewer. Heaven knows we have enough water, courtesy of the Norfolk Water Deal debacle. (Rest in peace, Al Casteen, the voice in the wilderness more than a decade ago when that ill-advised deal went down.)

County supervisors' approach to managing the proliferation of solar farms might have merit in the way this community deals with housing. Set a reasonable short-term cap on new rooftops and appoint an independent commission to study residential growth and make recommendations.

Isle of Wight and Smithfield should grow, but not recklessly.

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Growth machine keeps churning

A consultant's projection of more than a thousand new students in Isle of Wight's public schools in the years ahead, putting four school buildings over capacity, should be alarming news to anyone who cares about our community's well-being.

Not so for Smithfield's elected and appointed leaders, who keep approving huge housing developments and fawning over the developers peddling them. So much for managed growth.

Managed growth requires, well, a little management. In Smithfield, we don't manage it. We just find ways to approve it.

The latest blow to our anti-suburban, small-town, rural way of life was dealt by just three members of a seven-member Smithfield Town Council, a body beleaguered by scandal and internal strife. They saw an opening with the resignation of Councilman Wayne Hall, one of two sitting council members charged with crimes, and jammed through the controversial Grange at 10Main mixed-use development on the edge of the historic district.

After Joe Luter IV withdrew his Grange application in the fall, town leaders had an opportunity to engage with citizens and the developer and build a viable plan that wouldn't overwhelm residential streets with vehicular traffic and that would complement Smithfield's thriving tourism industry and vibrant downtown retail economy. They refused to do so. By a 3-2 vote, the Town Council set in motion a near doubling of the historic district's population with a single development.

And so the growth machine churns on, dirt now moving on the massive and largely despised Mallory Pointe development in northern Smithfield, the Grange not far behind.

We at least see some encouraging signs from the Isle of Wight County Planning Commission, which for the first time has considered the possibility that a big housing project might not be a good idea.

The Planning Commission last month again tabled a vote on the proposed Sweetgrass subdivision off Bennis Grant Boulevard, with several members, but not a majority, expressing deep concerns about rapid growth with no master plan to cope with it. Smithfield Planning Commissioner Thomas Pope earlier this year expressed concern that the town was not considering the cumulative impact of housing developments proposed and already approved. Regrettably, he failed to push the point.

Town and county leadership should immediately enact a moratorium on residential development until it understands what its prior decisions, including the Grange, already have wrought.

School Board Vice Chairman Jason Maresh, at his board's Nov. 8 meeting, called upon town and county officials to "start saying no" to developers "unless we know for a fact that we're going to grow facilities."

Amen.

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Tip of the hat to IW planners

The Smithfield Planning Commission should take a cue from its companion body in Isle of Wight County and begin to take seriously the rapid growth that threatens to turn Smithfield and surrounding area into just another suburb instead of the quaint, historic, rural community we love.

The Isle of Wight Planning Commission is urging county supervisors to reject the 615-home Sweetgrass development proposed for the 250-acre Yeoman Farm by the Sherwin Williams store just outside the Smithfield town limits on Bennis Church Boulevard.

As our Stephen Faleski reported in last week's edition, the commissioners voted 6-2 on Dec. 12 to recommend that county supervisors deny Ryan Homes parent NVR's rezoning application to construct homes and townhouses.

The vote followed a presentation by Isle of Wight County Schools spokeswoman Lynn Briggs, who warned that the influx of new students from Sweetgrass and other in-progress housing developments would strain existing capacity in public schools and put taxpayers on the hook for expensive construction.

The Smithfield Planning Commission, which has approved two ill-advised large housing developments in the past three years, appears to be on the verge of blessing at least two more, with none of the due diligence such as that being done by the Isle of Wight Planning Commission, which wisely invited Briggs to address the board before casting its vote on Sweetgrass.

We especially commend county Planning Commissioner Jennifer Boykin, who in October urged fellow commissioners to look at the collective impact of all housing developments rather than Sweetgrass alone. She made the motion to recommend denial of the Sweetgrass application. Kudos to Commissioners Cynthia Taylor, Bobby Bowser, Thomas Distefano, George Rawls and Rick Sienkiewicz for voting in favor of Boykin's motion.

A study Ohio-based Cooperative Strategies completed for IWCS this spring projected more than 1,000 new students would enter the school system upon the buildout of 13 planned housing developments in the county's northern end. On Dec. 5, the 267-home Grange at 10Main development slated for the western edge of Smithfield's historic district became the 11th to receive rezoning approval. Five, including a 240-unit apartment phase at the 776-home Benn's Grant community 2 miles outside Smithfield's town limits, are already under construction.

IWCS had just under 5,600 students enrolled as of Oct. 31, two-thirds of whom are concentrated in the northern end.

County supervisors should quickly ratify the Planning Commission's recommendation.

Virginia's seventh fastest-growing county frankly doesn't need to keep approving developers' applications left and right. The notion that Smithfield and Isle of Wight will die if they don't is absurd. It's time to get highly selective about new housing and start practicing the "managed growth" that politicians talk about but never adopt the policies to achieve.