

Residents Asked To Help Shape County's Future

by KATIE DUNN • Staff Writer

Wise County is at a crossroads.

Uncertainty about the future role coal production will play in the local economy has prompted brainstorming about other possibilities that might fill the void left by its decline.

As the county embarks upon a 12-month process to update its comprehensive plan — a long-range guide for growth and development in a community — residents are being encouraged to participate in efforts to redefine the county's future.

"It's a voyage of discovery," said Mike Chandler in a phone interview Monday.

Chandler is a partner with Planning Works, the consulting firm tapped to assist the county in its plan update. The last time the county updated its comprehensive plan was almost 16 years ago, in October 1998.

The first public comment session will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. on July 15. Chandler said an overview of the update process will be given, and attendees will be asked to share their thoughts about the county's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and visions for 10 and 20 years from now. There will also be a lunch session for the general public on July 16.

Chandler and Bruce Peshoff, a principal with Planning Works, will spend July 15 and 16 meeting with various focus groups to establish an understanding about the future direction the county and its communities want to take. These focus groups will address different topics, including quality of life, economic development, public safety, health and wellness, agriculture/natural resources/environment, land use, public works and transportation infrastructure, and education and skills training.

Peshoff said the county is experiencing a major change concerning its reliance on coal for economic stability and not knowing the extent of these changes can be alarming. "If you care about what Wise County is going to become, how does it survive and thrive," he said, "you'll find the time to participate in the process somehow. Wise County can either anticipate and project what those changes are going to be or react to it."

The plan update is an opportunity for residents, business owners and others to shape the county's future. "This is the time to lay that foundation of what Wise County ought to be doing," said Peshoff. "Coal is on its way out and either something is going to come in to help the county move forward or there will be a continual decline."

FOCUS ON COAL

The chance to participate in a process that could move the county's focus away from a coal-based economy is exciting for some people, but met with trepidation by others, said Chandler.

"You're recognizing that a component of what has been in your community for so long is likely to recede in significance if only for potentially a short period of time, or it might recede in interest for a longer period." This must be addressed with some compassion, but Chandler said the community must also rally, look forward and anticipate what life will be like if the decline continues.

If the county's future in terms of coal production is likely to look different than in the past century, Chandler said the comprehensive plan must address this and to what extent the community will continue its economic dependence on the mineral extraction industry. It must also consider inventing a new future that could relate to natural resources, but perhaps focus on outdoor recreation, agritourism, or timber harvesting, for example. Other potential economic development focuses could build upon the success of the University of Virginia's College at Wise and the potential for its continued growth and development. The county's many health issues might also spawn growth in the health care industry.

Chandler noted that these discussions must also be regional in perspective. Neighboring counties and states are also facing challenges related to coal declines, so conversations in Wise County must be held elsewhere, possibly eliciting a regional response.

WHY PARTICIPATE?

Why care about participating in the plan update? How do you know the end product won't simply sit on a shelf, gathering dust?

Peshoff said the plan guides a myriad of important county decisions. It should help prioritize expenditures for annual budgets and multi-year capital improvement plans, as well as provide goals and policies for what the county should pursue in the coming decades. It's not a tool that only the county's planning commission or board of supervisors should rely on when making decisions. The entire community should follow its guidelines for efforts that involve county services.

"I would argue that there really isn't anything that is occurring within the county that couldn't have been enhanced by coordinating with the comprehensive plan," he said. If a new development project is proposed, whether a subdivision, industrial park or other initiative, Peshoff said, the planning commission should study whether the project is consistent with the plan. Service providers, such as water, sewer or fire, should look to

the plan for guidance when considering additional investments to build fire or lift stations, for example. Developers should use the plan to identify locations best suited for developments.

“The plan is identifying areas projected to attract new growth and development and those areas where growth isn’t good at this point in time,” he said.

He added that the county can’t control what happens in Washington D.C. or Richmond, but it can control what happens on a local level.

“The heart and soul of a representative democracy is attending these public workshops and the planning forum and letting the county know what you think is important,” he said.

Chandler said if the plan is “properly prepared and reflective of the . . . aspirations of county residents, then it should carry with it a mandate to be followed.” An implementation process will be part of the final plan, and Chandler said this will help guide efforts going forward. “It will not be designed to be a trophy on a shelf, it will be designed to be put into play,” he said. “It’s ultimately the community’s decision. Hopefully if the community is involved in the preparation process, there will be a demand on the governing body and planning commission to actually follow the findings and goals and objectives within that document. If the community can associate value in the plan, then it’s easier for (governing bodies) to see value in the plan and move forward.”