

Lewis County Planning Commission

Public Meeting

In-Person & Virtual Meeting via Zoom

December 12, 2023 - Meeting Notes

Planning Commissioners Present: Lorie Spogen, District 1; Jason Alves, District 1; Gretchen Fritsch, District 3; Corbin Foster, AL; Frank Corbin, District 3; Bob Russell, District 2

Staff Present: Mindy Brooks, Senior Long Range Planner; Megan Sathre, Office Assistant Senior; Lee Napier, Director of Community Development; Eric Eisenberg, Housing & Infrastructure Specialist; Katie Johnson, Office Assistant Senior

Materials Used:

- Agenda
- Draft Meeting Notes – October 10, 2023
- Staff Presentation: Rural Housing Alternative
- Staff Report: Rural Housing Alternative
- 2024 Draft Docket

1. Zoom Guidelines

The clerk dispensed with the Zoom Guidelines.

2. Call to Order

A. Determination of a Quorum

6 Commissioners were present; there was a quorum.

Mindy introduced Jeff Skutley, who will serve on the Planning Commission beginning in January.

3. Approval of Agenda

Mindy requested amending the agenda to switch the order of the two workshops, doing the 2024 docket first, followed by the Rural Housing Alternative. The Chair entertained a motion to approve the agenda with Mindy's amendment. Commissioner Corbin made the motion to approve the agenda as amended; second by Commissioner Russell. The motion carried unanimously.

4. Approval of Meeting Notes

The Chair entertained a motion to approve the meeting notes from October 10, 2023. Commissioner Corbin made a motion to approve the notes as presented, second by Commissioner Russell. The motion carried unanimously.

5. Public Comment

Laura Sweany provided comments on housing alternatives. She brought up the idea of smaller than average housing and prioritizing low-income housing options in the county.

Kay Crawford provided comments on the need for co-housing options for the elderly as opposed to pricey retirement homes.

6. Workshop

A. Proposed 2024 Docket

Mindy Brooks, Senior Long-Range Planner for Lewis County, gave an overview of the proposed 2024 Planning Commission Docket. At the beginning of the year the Planning Commission will continue to discuss the Rural Housing Alternative as well as look at private road naming. The remainder of the year will primarily focus on the Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update.

Commissioner Corbin and Commissioner Russell asked for clarification about the road naming topic. Mindy responded that this item is about naming new roads as they are created, not going back and naming old roads. There is a public safety problem when emergency services cannot easily find addresses due to multiple dashes in the numbers. More information will be provided in January.

B. Rural Housing Alternative

Eric Eisenberg, Housing & Infrastructure Specialist, gave a presentation on the Rural Housing Alternative (*see presentation for details*). The following questions and comments occurred throughout the presentation.

Commissioner Fritsch thanked Eric for making the point that low-income housing is not going to bring more people to the area; they are already in the area and need better living conditions.

Commissioner Russell thanked Eric for the information and shared that he likes a lot of it, but there are still some things to be worked out. Russell stated that the questions that need answered are whether people like small houses, and whether people like small houses in rural areas. Russell is in favor of small houses and high density in LAMIRDs and cities. Commissioner Spogen shared that she does like small houses and can see how people would reasonably utilize them. However, building a small house with all the regulations, besides supply and demand, are driving the cost. There is no way to build a cheap house, no matter how small it is. For example,

energy code requires that new houses have triple paned windows. This is not conducive to building a cheap house. Mindy responded that increased cost due to changing building codes is an issue that many people are talking about at the state legislative level. Mindy assured the Commission that staff are working to make those concerns heard and will not give up. Mindy added that this is just one part of the affordable housing puzzle.

Commissioner Fritsch asked if it is possible to have multiple people renting out a single bedroom in a large home with shared kitchen and living spaces. Eric responded that yes, this scenario is allowable today if those people are all roommates. Eric noted that having multiple tiny homes is different from Fritsch's proposed scenario since each would be a dwelling unit with its own kitchen and living spaces and could be rented or sold as separate units. There are large differences regarding the legal and land use actions even though the ideas may be similar.

Commissioner Spogen reminded the Commissioners that in previous workshops they had concluded that the Rural Housing Alternative will be utilized and appreciated by some people but would not be used by all. This will not solve the affordable housing problem, but it is a valuable tool that can be added to the other existing tools in place.

Commissioner Corbin shared an anecdote about his need for different housing throughout his life based on his life circumstances and income. He concluded that it is necessary to have many levels of housing and affordability, but this must be done through the existing framework of the law.

Commissioner Alves shared that in the early conversations of this concept he was not in favor of it and felt that it was vague, but he likes the direction it is going. He shared that the size of the house does not matter, tiny homes are fine. It's about consistent rural character. He expressed the desire to have sufficient services, setbacks, visual barriers, and adequate roads. Alves likes the guardrails that Eric presented and having areas with slightly more density. Alves also noted that there are many factors to housing affordability that the Planning Commission has no control over.

Commissioner Russel expressed that he doesn't generally support increasing housing density outside of LAMIRDs or urban growth areas because he feels it doesn't match our rural character. He could be supportive if the increased density is focused near areas with a higher concentration of people and jobs, such as near LAMIRDs. Staff responded that dispersed RHA development will ensure protection of rural character because it is unlikely to impact rural services. While the Commissioners shared that they would like similar development near each other, staff encouraged them to remember that the RHA is proposing that there are multiple ways to build housing that still fits within rural character and thus, should be able to be located next to each other. The form-based approach requires that the RHA is rural character. Mindy suggested that if the Commissioners have concerns about the location of the RHAs to let staff know so they can put together some criteria to bring back for consideration.

Commissioner Spogen shared that she is not in favor of having to implement the newly suggested guardrails, particularly permitting through a Special Use Permit is something she does not favor. One of her concerns about tiny homes is not the size of the home, but that people do not have adequate room to store things. In a larger home, there are closets or spare rooms for stuff.

Commissioner Fritsch shared that materials that staff distributed before the meeting make it clear that there are capacity limits such as septic and water that will keep development from being too large in rural areas. Spogen agreed with Fritsch and stated that it doesn't seem that anyone has disagreed with the original concept that on a given parcel an individual may build up to 3,600 sq ft in one and a half acres.

Commissioner Corbin suggested having a pilot in each Commissioner district near an enticing geographic feature to see what guardrails are needed and working. Mindy suggested that a primary feature could be locating near rural jobs.

Commissioner Spogen asked if any of the Commissioners were in favor of any of the new guardrails that Eric presented. Mindy commented that what she has heard from many of the Commissioners throughout the discussion is that no one is in favor of many tiny homes. She suggested putting a cap of four homes per parcel. Eric suggested another option is to consider a minimum unit size. Alves responded that he does not have any issue with the size of the units, or total square footage, but more about how many families are living in one area, the density, and the pressure that puts on rural services. Another option Mindy suggested is a maximum number of RHA developments per year per geography, along with a cap on dwelling units per lot, would regulate density.

Commissioner Fritsch suggested that one possible guardrail could be requiring that only people who own the land can develop an RHA to discourage developers from coming in and proposing something that will make the most money but may not be the best option for conforming to rural areas. Some short-term rental regulations take this approach. Eric responded that there can be a limitation of this type, but it can be difficult to track. For example, there used to be a similar approach to ADUs in Lewis County, but often the owner would build the ADU for their ailing family member and the family member would then move to a different location and the ADU would be left to be rented or use in a different manner. In 2017, the County removed the owner occupancy/familial relationship requirement for ADUs.

Commissioner Russell noted that there may be a need for the RHA in East County that may not be apparent in the rest of the county.

Mindy suggested that the Commissioners take some time and think about the guardrails and continue the conversation in January.

Eric concluded his presentation with the next steps for the Rural Housing Alternative. Mindy encouraged the Commissioners to reach out to staff if they would like to ask questions and have discussions before the next meeting.

7. Good of the Order:

A. Staff

Mindy shared that the BOCC had their hearing on the Packwood Subarea Plan today and after they closed testimony, they continued the hearing to January 2nd. Commissioner Fritsch noted that the Packwood Subarea Plan hearing on YouTube cut out at 19 minutes asked if staff could help get her access to the rest of the video. Mindy said she would follow up with BOCC staff and let her know.

Mindy also shared that the final court order for the YMCA will be coming in the next week. Staff will give the Commissioners more information on the outcome of the YMCA in January.

B. Planning Commissioners

Commissioner Fritsch brought up the Packwood Sewer project and noted that it created more concern than expected. The community had lots of questions and concerns. Mindy responded that she has been to the meetings, as well as attending the tour, and let the Commissioners know they can reach out to her as well.

Commissioner Corbin shared that he attended the Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update community meeting in Salkum at the end of November.

8. Calendar

The next meeting of the Planning Commission will occur on January 9, 2024, and the agenda items are the election of the 2024 Chair and Vice Chair and adoption of the 2024 docket.

9. Adjourn

Commissioner Corbin made a motion to adjourn. The meeting was adjourned at 8:07 p.m.