

MEMORANDUM

To: Lane County Board of Commissioners
From: Mia Nelson, Chair of the Lane County Land Use Task Force
Date: July 20, 2010
Subject: Study opportunities related to rural development

Over the last few months, the Lane County Land Use Task Force (LCLUTF) spent a great deal of time discussing wide-ranging concerns related to the development of rural lands. This memo contains some of my thoughts and observations on these concerns. This is my opinion only; this is not a report of the LCLUTF as a whole.

We disagreed about many things, and in most cases we never came to anything resembling consensus. We disagreed about the balance point between the rights of the individual and the needs of the public. We disagreed about what are our most important public needs. We disagreed about how much development should be allowed on all types of rural land - not just resource lands (farm and forest) but on other types of rural lands as well. We disagreed about which kinds of development create more driving. We disagreed about what constitutes stewardship and appropriate use of rural land. These divisions seem to me reflective of unresolved disagreements within our broader community.

We had long debates regarding the overall desirability of rural development. Some members believe additional residential building should be allowed, and question whether it is in society's best interests to reduce rural development. They think that land use policies that discourage rural housing are at least partly responsible for the decline in the rural population of children, and subsequent decline in school enrollment. They place value on maintaining vibrant rural communities and believe additional rural homes would increase economic activity. They think that citizens should be able to live in the country if they wish.

Others believe the existing rules already allow too much rural development. These members think rural development has adverse energy and emissions consequences, and they also see a cumulative negative impact on habitat, farm and forest lands. They question what they see as tacit assumptions that all growth is good, that land is there to be exploited for financial gain, and urge a new model of stewardship that recognizes the interconnected nature of land, people and the inherent values in land that go beyond immediate financial reward. They said that in the past, the long-term ramifications of rural development have not been well considered. Their concern is that the landscape is suffering a "death by a thousand cuts," and that so much ill-considered rural development has already occurred that no more should be allowed.

We also disagreed about how productive land should be, in order to justify farm or forest (resource) designations. Some members said that lands that might be economically unproductive should nevertheless be retained in resource land designations due to the protections against development those designations provide. They think that all land has value, even if not for farming or forestry, and so should be preserved for wildlife habitat or open space.

Others think that residential development should be allowed on economically unproductive land since there is no other profitable use for it. They believe it is unfair to expect owners of unproductive rural lands to bear what they see as a disproportionately large burden in any plan to reduce rural development.

Reaching agreement on these issues is beyond the scope of the LCLUTF's duties or ability. However, I have provided further discussion on four subtopics, together with my suggestions for avenues of inquiry, in event any of these seem worthy of further investigation. It should be understood that the cost of some of these might be considerable, and could be prohibitive given the budget situation.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS ON RESOURCE LAND. Economically unproductive land is not supposed to be rezoned if the land must remain in resource land designation to protect the productivity of surrounding resource lands. However, some LCLUTF members claim that in actual practice, rezonings are rarely stopped for this reason, and they would like this to be different in the future. They also think that the number of new forest template dwellings should be reduced. They believe the impact of rural housing over time is cumulative on farm and forest land and that current policies do not take this into account. **The Board could consider performing an evaluation of the cumulative effect of rural housing on the viability of farm and forest operations and then consider policy changes if deemed necessary.**

HABITAT & OPEN SPACE NEEDS. As noted above, some members think that all rural land has value as open space and should be preserved. Others believe that the county's large supply of undevelopable F-1 land fully meets the need for open space, obviating the need to ask owners of economically unproductive land to also contribute to this resource. Regarding habitat, there appeared to be general agreement that unless a site has been inventoried as a Goal 5 resource, a rezoning from a resource land designation was unlikely to be halted based on a need to protect habitat. **The Board could consider performing a Goal 5 inventory of habitat and open space resources.**

SCHOOLS. As noted above, some believe that land use policies that discourage rural housing are responsible for the decline in rural population of children and subsequent decline in school enrollment. One member provided evidence that in the Pleasant Hill school district there has been a decline in the proportion children bear to the total population, as compared to Oregon as a whole. They believe that "gentrification" of rural areas is occurring, and that if more rural development is allowed, prices will come down and young families with children will return to rural areas. Other members, who do not believe there is necessarily any correlation between Oregon's land use system and the decrease in rural children, disputed this contention. They point out that this demographic shift might be occurring in other states that do not have the same restrictions on rural growth. Rural homes and acreage are more expensive to purchase, maintain and commute from than urban homes, and this could be a driving force in the demographic shift. They also question whether it is in the best interests of children to attend small rural schools, and cited local examples of poor rural school performance and the subsequent choice of parents to move their children to an urban school district. **The Board could try to determine the root causes of demographic shifts in rural**

populations of children, the effect of those shifts on rural schools, the desirability of maintaining rural schools in the future, and then pursue policy changes aimed at altering the demographic shifts if deemed necessary and possible to achieve.

ENERGY & GHG EMISSIONS: Proponents of limiting rural development believe it is self-evident that rural development causes more energy use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than urban development, and cited rush hour traffic on rural roads such as Highway 58. One member submitted a study that showed that on average, urban Americans produce 14% less carbon than do rural Americans. He also urged the LCLUTF to consider how our rural communities will function if oil supplies were to fall, for example, to 60% of today's levels. Several members expressed concern that we need to act now to change the way the rural areas are developed if we are to have any hope of meeting the state's ambitious targets for GHG reductions and avoid setting future rural residents up for financial trouble due to unmanageable transportation costs as gas prices rise. Other members said that while they agreed that controlling GHG and saving energy were worthy goals, they were not willing to accept as self-evident that rural development increases GHG and energy consumption. They pointed out that we don't really understand the driving habits of people - are commuters coming from other towns such as Veneta, or from rural homes? Examples exist of people driving less after moving to the country. Despite these objections, it appeared that most, perhaps all, LCLUTF members agree that energy and GHG emissions do need to be addressed. However, the majority would like to study the problem more, before taking action. These members said that the DLCD and the MPOs are just starting a process of identifying an effective means of doing scenario planning and addressing global climate change through the land use and transportation system. As a result, they see the Goal One proposals that lay out specific fixes as premature; they "jump the gun." These members believe that there could be other solutions, such as increasing transit to rural areas. Some suggest filling up the existing exception lands we have via "rural infill," and think that this could result in less driving as local economic activity might increase and people would then work from their home area. However, this premise was hotly contested by others, who point to bedroom communities such as Veneta as proof that most outlying residents will continue to drive to Eugene and Springfield for work. **The Board could choose to develop standards for identifying and minimizing future GHG emissions and energy consumption in conjunction with the ongoing DLCD and MPO scenario planning. The Board could then pursue policy changes to implement the strategies that come out of those planning efforts.**