

County approves neighborhood plan for Amsterdam-Churchill area

By LAUREN RUSSELL Chronicle Staff Writer Dec 10, 2009

At the height of the building boom in Gallatin County, Amsterdam-Churchill-area residents knew they were at a crossroads and could either wait for development to hit them, or craft a plan for growth that meshed with their rural values.

They chose the latter, and on Tuesday, more than two years of twice-monthly meetings between residents and community and county officials culminated in the Gallatin County Commission's unanimous approval of the Amsterdam-Churchill Neighborhood Plan.

"It started because the folks out there have been watching changes around the valley and changes in their own community and recognized that the best route is to get out ahead of it," Warren Vaughan, county planner, said.

The plan covers about 80 square miles, roughly from Manhattan south to Norris Road and between Schutter Road to the west and the Four Corners and Belgrade zoning districts to the east, Vaughan said.

Covering 51,000 acres, it's one of the county's largest zoning districts to date.

Growth will be mostly confined to the "town core," a roughly one-mile square enveloping Churchill proper.

Zoning in the surrounding rural swatches will basically limit development to one house per 160 acres, with some exceptions, including agricultural operations, Vaughan said.

The plan also contains a "Right to Farm" clause, which will allow farmers and ranchers to run their businesses without cumbersome regulations on things such as noise, smell and operating hours.

“With people moving into our area, they don’t always get what we are,” Brent Sinnema, a local farmer, told the commission Tuesday. “We work all night—there’s going to be noise, there’s going to be stink, and you’re going to get some of that.”

Protecting the agricultural way of life was the driving force behind the plan, said Walt Sales, chairman of the steering committee.

When the group first met in November 2007, community members were asked, among other things, to identify what they valued most in the area and what they didn’t want to see changed, he said. Agriculture and small-town living topped the list.

“We saw that this was a chance for the ag community to be part of the zoning process to protect some of those values and goals,” Sales said.

Within the town core, growth will be encouraged, Vaughan said. The plan anticipates future infrastructure, such as roads and sewer lines, to meet the needs of development, including projects like the proposed Amsterdam Village subdivision, which has stalled since being approved by the county in 2008.

The only uses the document bans are bars, casinos and sexually oriented businesses, a stipulation that conforms to the values the community identified in the planning stages, Vaughan said.

One family that farms along the southern portion of the area near Norris Road opted out of the plan.

Up next is the sometimes tedious process of hashing out the zoning regulations, Vaughan said, but the groundwork has been laid.

With an impressive amount of community input — about 200 of the area’s approximately 1,000 residents attended community events — planners have a clear direction to follow, he said.

On Tuesday, commissioners lauded the group's efforts.

"You folks have done a fabulous job here," Commissioner Bill Murdock said. "Of all the community plans, this is the best I've seen."

"In my opinion, residential and agricultural owners in Amsterdam-Churchill understand how important rural agriculture is," said Commissioner Joe Skinner, a former farmer.

"You've embraced the idea that to keep those things you want, the things you enjoy and appreciate, there needs to be a certain amount of regulation."

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