

# **ELK COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES**

## **ELK COUNTY COURTHOUSE ANNEX**

**April 24, 2024**

Carl Gamarino called the regular meeting of the Elk County Planning Commission to order at 3:03 PM with the Pledge of Allegiance.

The following were present:

Members: Carl Gamarino, Dale Anderson, Cheryl Ruffner, Jim McClain, John Schatz, Brandi Hanes, Ron Minnick, Bill Chiesa and Becky Krieg

Planning Department: Tracy Gerber, Becki Taylor and Kathy McClelland

Guests: Brian Funkhouser, Michael Baker International, Kathy Wyrasdick, Michael Baker International, Amy Auman, Elk County Housing Authority, Commissioner Fritz Lecker, Commissioner Matt Quesenberry and Commissioner Greg Gebauer

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

Introductions were conducted at this time.

### **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Bill Chiesa noted that his name was omitted for attending but was present.

Jim McClain made a motion to approve of the minutes of the January 24, 2024 meeting; Cheryl Ruffner seconded the motion and carried unanimously.

### **PRESENTATION**

Brian Funkhouser, Michael Baker International, began by stating that today will be less of a presentation and more of a conversation with the Planning Commission Board. The Comprehensive Plan is a joint effort between Elk and Clearfield Counties. Mr. Funkhouser reminded the Board that he was at a Planning Commission meeting last summer, a lot of work has been completed on the Comprehensive Plan since then. Brian also stated that it has been 25 years since Elk County has updated their Comprehensive Plan. States normally like these plans updated on a 10-year cycle. One of the primary goals as a Planning Commission Board member, is to be involved in maintain the County's Comprehensive Plan and guide the growth of Elk County over time. Mr. Funkhouser stated that today marks the 45-day review/comment period which is required by the stated and municipality planning code. For Elk County, the Planning Commission has the authority to release the draft plan for public review. After the 45-day review/comment period, Tracy Gerber will take the draft plan before the Board of Commissioners at a regularly scheduled Commissioners Meeting to adopt the Comprehensive Plan. Brian mentioned they have been working alongside North Central Regional Planning and Development Corp. to help market and promote the Comprehensive Plan for review. Before starting the review of the Plan, Brian asked for comments.

Dale Anderson began with his comments on the Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Anderson said that he is a member of the Planning Commission and represents Ridgway Borough and Ridgway Township. The following comments, represent his own comments. He is not being paid to attend this meeting, or to prepare and make these comments.

It is obvious from the plan that Elk County is losing population. See graph on page 12. Is this population loss intentional? Are we planning to make Elk County a playground, devoid of employment?

The Plan has a lot of focus on recreation. Employment and income supported by recreation and visitor spending has been relative stable (see graph page 26) and is not a high level.

We need to drop all reference to climate action. There is absolutely nothing Elk County can do to make one bit of difference in the worldwide climate. It is only a distraction from the issues that we should be focused on.

We need to improve our economy. More comparison with counties who are successful with programs to improve their economy would be helpful.

The plan needs to include a graph showing the relative loss of employment opportunities versus the increase in government land. Elk County suffers from Government Land Sprawl. Every effort must be made in this plan to control Government Land Sprawl. The plan notes that we are losing our tax base, we lose property transfer taxes, and we lose the opportunity for the highest and best use of the land when government entities gain control of our land. The plan must emphatically state, "No net loss of private land". See graph on page 49, Elk County is over 70% government land.

Conservation easements stymie growth and strip land of value. The plan needs to show the total amount of property encumbered by conversation easements. Conversation easements must be tallied and listed.

Housing and housing problems are identified as issues. The housing problem will solve itself if the economy is strong. Blight is also identified as a housing problem (page 17). HUD has contributed to this issue by facilitating absentee landowners. The absentee landowners do not maintain their property leading to blight.

On page 62, the plan stresses "green design". This green design will not help solve the housing problem, it only adds costs and more restrictions.

Rural areas produce natural resources. Employment in the area is dependent on this production of natural resources. I see nothing in this plan to encourage increasing the production of natural resources? I made this point at the initial focus group meeting with the Michael Baker people. The plan needs to be encouraging the production of forest products, coal, oil and natural gas. While the second largest employer in Elk County is a forest products company, there is not recognizable forest products representatives listed in the focus groups.

Electric vehicle charging stations are not practical in this area and do not need to be planned for.

This plan is an update to the previous plan. How close have we come to the target in the previous plan?

Dale Anderson brought copies of his statement to give to the Commissioners, Press and anyone wanting a copy.

Fritz Lecker questioned Dale Anderson where climate change was in the Plan.

Dale Anderson was unsure the page it was on, but stated it was in there.

John Schatz said that he had some comments, some being mirrored from what Dale Anderson said but mostly on the history end of it. Mr. Schatz said that he read the plan over and over and it's granted that people are leaving but why? He said that about 30 years ago, the issue called the DuPont System, he doesn't believe the industry in this County which is a lot of what this County is made of, realized what they did. John said they put in a system where people are working days and nights 12 hours a day. These workers could not attend their children's school activities, their own social life is ruined. Industry did this. How to get back and to the industry workforce is going to be difficult. He states that this is only one reason why people are leaving.

John Schatz stated he strongly believes in education. Where he is from, if you didn't attend college, you were useless; speaking from 55 years ago. Not attending college, took away our whole sector of pipe fitters, electricians, carpenters, etc. John Schatz stated solar energy, how many days a year do we get sunshine? He added that we would get more days with the solar panel with a foot of snow on it than you do with sunshine He feels it's a better alternative for Florida and California or someplace where it's sustainable and usable; for Clearfield and Elk County to sink millions of dollars into solar energy, he can't see that.

As for wind power, John stated that he goes to State College often. For the past 5 years, John has drove past the turbines that are placed on the mountain in State College, he stated that he has yet to see the turbines turn. Our tax dollars paid to put them there and they're not working.

As for medical in Elk County, we just lost another part of the hospital. To get people to come to Elk County, you have to have a medica facility.

John stated that young people are not going to come to Elk County and have children when they have to drive 45 minutes to the hospital. Another comment on the history side, the 219 corridor was fought for 30+ years before it was dropped.

Imagine what would happen if we had the 219 corridor; a direct line between Interstate 90 and Interstate 80. Everything would've benefitted immensely between those 2 points.

As for housing, John has a friend that has 2 children and would like to move back to town. Within 2 days John found 7 homes for this friend and kids to look at it. There are homes for sale, they may need work and not exactly what you're looking for but they are there.

In closing, John stated that the EV Charging Stations are a joke. If it's going to be such a popular thing, it should belong in the private sector such as gas stations. He doesn't believe the government should be putting EV charging stations in, they should be purchased and run by the private sector.

In regards to the bicycle trails, we have snow on the roads 9/10 months out of the year, the other 3 months the trails aren't fit to ride because of all the stones from the year before.

John Schatz reminded the group that these comments are personal and his own comments but it looks like this plan would've worked perfectly for the State College area. He added the last time he was in State College, he drove around for 4 hours to see what was going on; it's amazing. On the downside, Penn Highlands is putting up a new hospital in State College, if you go down the street, the largest crane on the eastern coast is sitting on Mount Nittany Hospital property. Mount Nittany is adding a 10-story patient tower up to service the citizens. This is all funded and being maintained by the people of State College. John said he knows this because he asked the question. He also noted that if you drive down to Toft Trees, there is a 7-story outpatient care center due to be open soon; we need Penn Highlands somewhere else. He added that these are just his personal comments after reading this Plan over and over.

Ron Minnick stated that he believes the charging stations shouldn't be provided by the government. They should be kept privatized and allow supply and demand take care of it.

Barb Whitehouse stated she will be speaking off the record as a citizen of Ridgway Borough since 1950. She stated that she and her husband are moving to Jefferson County to Brookville. They had the greatest eye opener that they've had in a long time, when they go through Brookville on their way home from doctor appointments in Pittsburgh, they stop at Denny's to eat. They have the same thing that Ridgway had when she was growing up in the 50's and 60's, store fronts everyone on all 3 city blocks in downtown Brookville are filled. There are a variety of stores, anything you want. Churches are full in Brookville, not like here in Ridgway. What they don't have in Brookville that we have in Elk County is, Walmart. Barb stated she does agree with John Schatz on the DuPont system and remembers when that happened, and also Main Street died the day they opened Walmart. Jefferson County, 30-miles down the road have figured it out. They have a nice community, no blighted homes, currently, Barb said they live next door to one. Also, we don't need EV, they've already proved electric cars aren't any good. She mentioned to the group to drive down to Brookville downtown, you would think your back in Ridgway in the "old days".

Cheryl Ruffner stated that all that has been put together has been seen before. These problems are not new. Cheryl questioned, where do we go from here? When this draft is put through and finalized, is it up to the Commissioners to pick up the pieces and move forward or is it up to individual municipalities, where do we go from here? We know the problems, this is just another look; some of these things have been discussed over and over, studies have been done to talk about the same thing. How do we take this piece of information and start to build back our county? Elk County has real issues that need addressed, how do we do it?

Brian Funkhouser answered that there needs to be lot of different partners. The issues identified within the plan are things that Elk County can't do on their own. Working through these problems will involve partnerships between the state, local and regional level. Brian stated they will be working with Tracy Gerber on the comments that come in over the 45-day review period. We will then coordinate with Tracy and the Commissioners on the types and magnitude of comments that come in. After all the comments have been satisfied to the Planning Commission and the Board of Commissioners, that's when planning transitions into implementation. Brian added that Tracy is the staff for the Planning Commission will be the

point person for implementing the Plan. There is an implementation plan that's included within the Comprehensive Plan that outlines who organizes all the recommendations in the different areas. The Implementation Plan includes specific actions, tasks, how-tos and who the lead implementing agency be. Tracy Gerber and Jodi Brennen have structured the Comprehensive Plan as when the transition from Planning to implementation we want the momentum to continue. Brian stated that they are working with US Planning Commission and the Board of Commissioners implementing the various action items. The County will not be able to move forward on all the action items simultaneously. In the Implementation Plan there are recommendations in terms of which goals are short term, long term and thing the County has to work on an ongoing basis. Brian added that he will be on hand to provide support the Planning staff with plan implementation.

Cheryl Ruffner questioned how long they will provide support?

Brian Funkhouser answered that their job as consultants, they assist the County with the planning, then step back and allow the County begin implementation. The way Elk and Jefferson County's contract was set up with Michael Baker, International, the County planning directors wanted them to really help with the transition.

Dale Anderson questioned Brian if he reviewed the last plan to see how close it was to hitting all the targets.

Brian Funkhouser stated that the old plan was 25- years.

Dale Anderson said that it doesn't matter, did they hit any of the targets? Do we know?

Brian Funkhouser stated that he didn't know and questioned the group if they knew.

John Schatz answered that he's been around here for 72 years, St. Marys was St. Marys, Ridgway was Ridgway. We are all Elk County. Why can't we work together? We can't do nothing alone but if we stand united maybe something could happen. John thinks this is a big issue that should be pushed hard.

Cheryl Ruffner questioned Brian on his past experiences with other counties and communities with these types of studies, what are the outcomes? Do they seem to follow through, do they fall short, start out great then fizzle? What can we do to make sure that doesn't happen?

Brian Funkhouser suggested that it would be good for the County to form an implementation committee and an implementation task force, maybe a sub committee of the Planning Commission that would have ownership of providing that momentum for implementation. He feels that it is important to develop a "report card" of progress. He stated that every county is required to develop an annual report.

Kathy Wyrasdict stated that before she became part of Michael Baker, International she was the Planning Director of Erie County. She suggested prioritizing the action items where you find unison from the Planning Commission and the Commissioners, on which goal to tackle first. Choose 5 action items that you have momentum and good partnerships already established. She stated the reason you don't go back to a plan that's 25 years old, because it's 25 years old, people have left, things have changed but you can approach a plan in a meaningful way and not get overwhelmed. Kathy said that when she was the Erie Planning Director, on their Plan, they had 11 bold moves that they needed in their Comprehensive Plan; they reached 10 of the 11 in 5 years.

Cheryl Ruffner questioned how will funding affect this? She mentioned anytime the government get involved, prices increase. How do we get the private sector involved?

Kathy Wyrasdict agrees and said local government is most likely better at leveraging and partnering with private sector than state or federal. A lot of what came from Erie's Comprehensive Plan came from Erie Insurance. Erie Insurance was invested in seeing City of Erie turn around. Erie Insurance did a Lion's share of investing in the downtown development; this happened because of our local government going to Erie Insurance. She has seen success in other areas and should anticipate these kinds of partnerships in implementing the County's plan.

John Schatz questioned Commissioner Quesenberry if municipal bonds are doable at a county level. John added that there is money floating around this area, municipal bonds would put a decent return so that maybe they would take 1 or 2 project goals from the Plan off the table. He said that it could be some of the funding and administered by the County.

Commissioner Quesenberry answered that the debt from the municipal bonds would have to be repaid.

John Schatz said that he wasn't sure of the process but it could be a revenue avenue.

Commissioner Quesenberry said that it would depend on what you are building and if it would produce a cash flow; otherwise, a way or source to repay the debt would need to be figured out.

Kathy Wyrasdick agrees with Commissioner Quesenberry that it is a great way to get a sum of money but the debt needs to be repaid.

John Schatz stated to maybe contact our legislative people to change the rules to get some monies flowing towards the projects in the Comprehensive Plan.

Kathy Wyrasdick answered that Comprehensive Plan is a great way to leverage grant funding. Federal, state, local and non-profits funders want to see that a Comprehensive Plan is in place.

Commissioner Quesenberry stated that it would be great if the State recognized that you have a Comprehensive Plan and it added value to your grant application, which he believes doesn't occur with most state agencies.

Becky Krieg added that she believes business are willing to help out. When the hospital released its recent closing of maternity, area factories commented that no one reached out to them. There is possibility that Domtar may assist with cleaning up the slum & blight in Johnsonburg. Becky disagrees that there are not a lot of starter homes in Elk County available for purchase. There is nothing under \$100,000; there are homes in Johnsonburg that are affordable but need major repairs. A lot of people don't have the no how to "fix up" an affordable home.

Cheryl Ruffner agrees that businesses would assist projects, that's sometimes when the biggest and quickest gains happen. Government grants are a lengthy process. Everything takes time and feels it's a great place to start.

Jim McClain stated that sitting around the table today is a bunch of 60/70 year old people, looking back at what was. What was then isn't coming back and if we are not progressive, were not going to be anywhere. We can be regressive till the day we die. There aren't young people sitting here, nor is there industry sitting around this table, no hospital administrator present.

Becky Krieg commented agrees that lack of internet is a big hindrance in Elk County. She would love to have the ability to work from home some days, but her internet connection at home is unreliable.

Jim McClain commented that the Commissioners are aware of the issues he has with internet service. He stated that he lives in an area that has fiber optic cable which runs up Route 948, people that live out of Jones Township and on into highland township can not get that internet service. They are harnessed into whatever Verizon offers which is maybe 3 megabytes of service. Jim stated that we could go back to writing letters but that is regressive. Instant communication is a necessity in today's times.

Commissioner Lecker mentioned that she had good news on the internet front. The Commissioners were part of a conversation with Verizon this morning, who was selected as the awardees of the Bead funding. There are hopes there will be progress. There will be a 10.2-million-dollar project between McKean and Elk Counties. Ms. Lecker questioned if this would be an update for the Comprehensive Plan? She said that in her estimation, the plan seems to be out dated.

Brian Funkhouser said that he will adjust that to be current. Brian wanted to touch back on EV's. A point that hasn't been made yet is that the strategies in the plan are not binding. If there are strategies or elements within the plan that shouldn't go out, he would like to know. Brian added that comments toward the EV charging stations, the North Central Commission is actively working on site assessments for electric vehicle charging across the region. He asked the group if there is anything in the plan that "shouldn't see the light of day"? With no comment, Brian ended his presentation and will continue to be working with Tracy Gerber and Jodi Brennen and North Central in launching the review process.

Cheryl Ruffner stated that she is part of the Elk County Riders ATV, they were initiating the Trail of Dreams which would connect all the communities in Elk County with ATV travel to promote tourism and outdoor awareness. As of this week at the groups meeting, there was one portion of roadway from Route 555 Benezette to Grayhill Road was a PennDOT road that was needed opened which they have agreed to open which is not on the PennDOT/DCNR pilot program. This will give an approximate 20/25-mile trail from the Grant side of Benezette, all the way to Treasure Lake, DuBois. Those 20/25 miles will be added for a total of 46 miles of trail riding, Cheryl asked that this be mentioned because it something we need to develop. The group is making great strides, they met again with PennDOT again to discuss an area which is a critical trail connector which could connect to a leased property by Elk County Riders ATV. The group leases this property which is a 3,000-acre parcel from Lyme Emporium Hardwoods, referred to as Lyme Timer; this connection is very important because it will connect to the City of St. Marys. This achievement would be huge economic boost for Elk County. She would like this achievement added to the Comprehensive Plan.

John Schatz questioned Cheryl Ruffner if this program is in reach?

Cheryl Ruffner answered that the bridge is ordered from a company in Pittsburgh and should be delivered in the next 2 months. The project is out for bids, the project will be behind the ball field in Byrnedale and across Kersey Run. Route 255 is our North/South divider that divides the East and West sides of the County. Bids are due April 29; we will see what they come in at and hopefully in 30 days be able to start. Once the bridge is in, it's done and legal and within reach.

Brian Funkhouser asked Cheryl Ruffner for a written statement.

Cheryl Ruffner said she will get that for him.

Question was asked how this would be put out for public comment?

Brian Funkhouser answered that we are working with North Central with press releases, social media. The public will be to download the plan from North Central's website and also there will be a public survey.

A member of the press commented of the record that if the Ridgway Industrial Development Corporation is still around, he feels they would be a great key partner to work with. He feels this would be a great outlet to keep the industrial base healthy.

Butch Gamarino commented when you contact industry, he has seen donations of up to \$175,000. Funds are there, they need to be looked for.

Dale Anderson commented that looking at the graph on page 49 regarding the government land in Elk County vs. Clearfield County, he feels mixing the counties together is a poor fit. He added that the government lands constrain everything we do. You are unable to expand to a home building site South of Ridgway because it's game commission land, can't expand west because it's forest service land.

## **SUBDIVISION REVIEW & APPROVAL**

Tracy Gerber asked for questions, comments or concerns on the list of subdivisions completed.

Cheryl Ruffner asked the location of the Bleggi/Whitetail real estate.

Tracy Gerber answered that it's on George and Charles Street in the City of St. Marys.

John Schatz mentioned it was a previous subdivision that was revised.

## **OLD BUSINESS**

### **Small Communities Entitlement Program (CDBG) Report**

Becki Taylor stated that she has begun solicitation for the 2024 CDBG Program in February. The first public hearing is scheduled. Applications for this year, are due to the Planning office no later than July 10, 2024. The Horton Township, Whetstone Waterline CDBG Competitive application was submitted to DCED in January. The application is currently in review, DCED did reach out with 2 questions they had.

Becki Taylor added that DCED did answer the question the Planning Commission had regarding the water pressure and how it would affect future fires and if there was enough to suffice the situation and they definitely will have enough water pressure.

Becki Taylor updated the Planning Commission on projects that are finished and bids awarded.

### **Housing Report**

Kathy McClelland stated she added Slum & Blight to her report. She is asked that if any Board member knows that their municipality is looking for funding, to please contact her. For a property to qualify, it must be in the County's Repository for us to raise them. Our Slum & Blight program allows \$12,500 towards the property; the municipality is responsible for the balance.

Tracy Gerber added that the home must be vacant.

## **Directors Report**

### **Comprehensive Plan Update**

Tracy Gerber stated when the email goes regarding the public comment period for the Comprehensive Plan, she will email it to all board members so that it can be forwarded and shared.

### **Hazard Mitigation Plan**

Tracy Gerber stated that in October 2023, there was a couple pending approval for municipalities. At this time, everything has been approved. All of our municipalities have participated and received an approval letter. The final plan has been forwarded with all their records and approval letters. The plan is good for 5 years.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### **New Board Member**

Butch Gamarino welcomed Becky Krieg. She will be representing Jones Township.

## **COMMENTS FROM GUESTS**

## **SCHEDULING OF NEXT MEETING**

The next regular meeting will be held on Wednesday, July 24, 2024 at 4:30 PM in Conference Room #2 in the Elk County Courthouse Annex.

**ADJOURNMENT**

With no further business, Cheryl Ruffner made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 5:20 PM; Bill Chiesa seconded the motion and carried unanimously.