

Cathy Poole: Triad needs new strategy for growth

By Cathy M. Poole

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North Carolina farmland and open spaces are destroyed at a rate of 100,000 acres every year. It is time to take a fresh look at growth terms and strategies. Self-defeating excuses about job losses will not impress future generations left with abandoned commercial sites, dwindling and polluted water supplies and no farmland. Modern economic theory such as Michael Kinsley's of the Rocky Mountain Institute shows that it is possible to have sustainable economic growth without the need for continued geographic expansion. In other words, a county or municipality can have economic growth without continuously cutting down trees. Mixed-use urban infill redevelopment is one of the many ways of developing a local economy without geographic expansion.

Unfortunately, in the Triad many local developers and officials are getting it exactly backward. Instead of even considering enlightened, proven development strategies, they insist on employing the discredited approach of bulldoze, pave and destroy every inch of developable land that they can purchase, annex or condemn.

The Heart of the Triad plan calls for massive commercial and residential development in the rural center of the Triad. With 2,427 structurally deficient bridges in our state, scarce N.C. Department of Transportation funds should not be used to build the "North-South Heart of the Triad Parkway," which is listed as a "development corridor." This ill-conceived plan was devised by developers, but some local elected officials are going along with it, apparently out of fear they will be left out of something. This area contains three watersheds, wetlands, farms and wildlife habitats that local officials should be fighting to protect.

Many North Carolina counties are experiencing tremendous growth pressure. To accommodate growth, while preserving the environment, we need to look at new ways of using land as a resource. Several North Carolina counties have adopted new subdivision ordinances promoted by a nationally known planner, Randall Arendt. His approach is to require a developer to site-walk and look at the natural features of the land, figure out which portions should be preserved as natural areas (50-60 percent of buildable property), and then cluster development in areas that do not impact the preserved natural areas. Arendt's approach is supported by the American Planning Association, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and the Environmental Law Foundation.

I would suggest that the General Assembly might wish to develop legislation to provide guidance and templates for other counties to produce ordinances of this nature. Considering the rate at which we are losing farmland and natural areas, time is of the essence in getting this done.

The American Planning Association has stepped up to the plate with the new APA Planning Policy for Climate Change to reinforce utilization of existing infrastructure. Duke's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy is working with UNC School of Government to engineer storm water runoff to be used as an asset.

Our environment has reached a critical juncture. The wise words of Ansel Adams, American photographer, 1902-1984, say it best: "Let us leave a splendid legacy for our children. ... Let us turn to them and say: 'This you inherit; guard it well, for it is far more precious than money ... and, once destroyed, nature's beauty cannot be repurchased at any price.' "

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