COMMENTARY

To: Harrisonburg City Council
Date: April 16, 2025
Re: Proposed Rezoning of 10+/-ac from R-1 to R-8 along Smithland Rd
Applicant: Riverbend Investments

Members of Harrisonburg City Council and City Staff:

As you know, I have attended and spoken against the above proposal at two Planning Commission meetings and at last week's City Council meeting. My input to date has been in support of, and as a spokesperson for, our neighborhood owners and residents, reflecting concerns shared by pretty much everyone (well, everyone we were able to contact) along the affected stretch of Smithland Road. As it is apparent that both City Council and Planning Commission have given little consideration to those concerns, I now write on my own to provide my personal input.

The City has a well thought out and publicly vetted Comprehensive (Comp) Plan. That plan, as concerns land development, offers a vision for a developed City that stresses quality as much as, or perhaps more than, quantity. This language includes goals for preserving existing trees, adding new trees and plantings, clustering development to preserve green space, ensuring compatibility with adjacent existing land uses, protecting environmentally sensitive resources/areas, and other similar "quality-based" objectives. Even the description of Low Density Mixed Residential, the Comp Plan's vision for this area, includes these goals.

What is proposed for this new development along Smithland Road shows little consideration for these quality goals. The minimal open space shown on the developer's concept plan is: 1) to provide a 500sf playground area (about the size of three parking spaces at the Walmart) and, 2) the result of space needed for the existing power line easement and for small spaces where they can't fit a whole lot. The tiny lots themselves hold little outdoor space beyond the house footprints. No new or replacement trees are proposed or proffered, nor is there likely to be any space on the lots for trees (note that street trees are not required here, and lot line utility easements will restrict tree planting).

This plan as presented requires the complete reworking of the property to where all forested and vegetated areas within will be eliminated and the property regraded to provide for as many houses as can be squeezed in. There will be no preservation of any natural areas on the property. This will not only destroy precious tree canopy and habitat, it will completely change the hydrologic functioning of the property such that downstream properties will receive significant increases in stormwater runoff.

It is apparent that the City's review on this proposal has yet to consider the above Comp Plan guidance, such review focusing almost solely on the density aspects of the Comp Plan vision for this property and surrounding properties, making the misguided comparison between the Low Density Mixed Residential designation in the Comp Plan and the R-8 Zoning District. If density is the only aspect of this plan that matters, then truly the City is putting quantity over quality. This is supported by what seems to be the overwhelming position from Council that "the City needs housing", this in spite of the fact that Mr. Fletcher pointed to multiple recently approved developments that are moving forward with a significant number of planned housing units.

There was much said at last week's City Council meeting about "needing to get this right because we're setting a precedent for how this 180+ acre area of the City develops over the coming years." I totally agree, and that precedent concern is in the submitted neighborhood petition. That said, all the City seems to be concerned about "getting right" is how the street system is laid out to meet City standards. Little or no concern has been given as to how to "get right" the above quality-based provisions of the Comp Plan, and more importantly, those specific to Low Density Mixed Residential.

As I see it, here are some of the "precedents" that the City is setting by approving this development as proposed and as has been discussed:

- The guidance and vision in the Comprehensive Plan regarding the quality of a residential development warrant little consideration against maximizing housing opportunities.

- The concerns of adjacent and neighborhood property owners carry little weight against other perceived needs.

- The preservation of mature tree canopy and vegetation important to environmental protection and wildlife habitat is not a priority.

- The detrimental impacts on existing street infrastructure and public safety are not important enough to deny the increased density of residential areas.

- The City's R-1 Zoning District no longer has a place in the future development of the City.

Are these really the precedents for development the City wishes to stand behind?

I have and will continue to say that I am not opposed to appropriate, respectful development. Were the guidance in the Comprehensive Plan being considered here, I feel this development would be more palatable to the neighborhood. However, what I am seeing is favor being given to rezone a property to allow for a tiny-lot subdivision and the maximization of the number of lots within it, seemingly because, as the developer states, the property is odd shaped and not conducive to development under its current zoning. Does that characteristic justify abandoning the vision plan for the future of the City? Is that the goal, to maximize housing units on every vacant property in the City?

I apologize if I am coming across as rude. I am simply trying to point out that there are more aspects to development, as written in the City's own Comprehensive Plan, than how many housing units it provides. I and my neighbors truly hope such aspects will be given their due consideration.

Sincerely,

Dan Rublee
1251 Smithland Road

For Hand Delivery

April 22, 2024

Honorable Mayor Reed and Fellow Council Members:

With the website being down all day, I write to you after much time reflecting on the rezoning of 2 parcels on Smithland Road. As a resident of the area for the past 35+ years, I am greatly concerned about the impact this rezoning will have on the area. I am not anti-development but I do have some serious concerns about this possible rezoning which is against the comprehensive plan which the city has in place.

To keep my thoughts brief for your consideration, I shall simple list them.

- The density is far too great for the parcel of land being considered.
- The impact on the existing infrastructure will negatively impact the existing homes and residents. There are days we have minimal water pressure now. I can only imagine what will happen if you add another 50 homes to that demand.
- The amount of green space being proffered is so small it will not have a meaningful purpose unlike the amount of green space at each of the existing homes.
- The number of cars zooming along the road will increase exponentially, thus making it unsafe for walking. It's already a risk to walk with limited shoulder to move out of the way for cars or trucks.
- The potential impact on the schools which are already facing over-crowding may necessitate another school which will cost way more than the tax revenue generated by this development.
- What precedent will this set for rezoning other remaining parcels in the city?

I appreciate you taking the time to read my concerns. Please come visit our area of the city and see for yourselves how this does not fit in with the comprehensive plan and vote no to this rezoning request. There has to be a better solution to this than the current proposal.

Thank you for taking the time to review my concerns.

Sincerely,

Sallie M. Strickler
1015 Smithland Road
Harrisonburg VA 22802